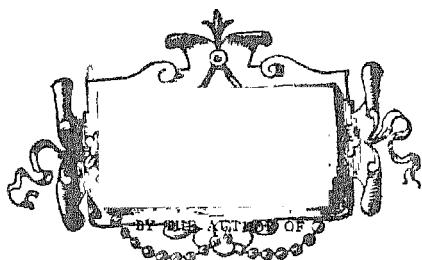


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TEMPTED

OR, THE OLD LADY'S PRIZE

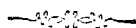


'THE HEROINES OF HAARLEM,' 'MAGGIE DAWSON,'
'COUNT RENNEBERG'S TREASON,' ETC.

London
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
56 PATERNOSTER ROW, AND 65 ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD

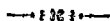
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TEMPTED; OR, THE OLD LADY'S PRIZE.



CHAPTER I.

THE NEW SCHOLAR.

TOTTIE, Tottie, come here a minute,' called Amy Bruce in a loud whisper, as Tottie emerged from the dining-room. A quick glance revealed Amy peeping over the banisters, beckoning to Tottie, who was lingering to answer something which Mrs. Bruce, the occupant of the dining-room, had just said.

Tottie Middleton at length succeeded in satisfying Mrs. Bruce, and quickly closing the door, ran upstairs.

'I thought your mamma never would leave off talking, Amy; I have been dying to get away for ever so long.'

'What was it about?'

'I'm sure I don't know, I wasn't listening much. Good behaviour and tit-for-tat, such as irrepressible young mortals like me generally get favoured with.'

'Tit-for-tat! you surely don't say mamma has been recommending that?'

'Not of the "pinch-for-a-rap" sort. You know what I mean, Amy: "do unto others as you would

they should do unto you," and all that kind of thing.'

'Mamma is so good,' said Amy, with a half sigh. 'I wonder whether I shall ever be like her.'

'Not yet, I hope,' was the blunt rejoinder. 'Wait, at least, till you put on caps before you come the mentor over me. But what were you making those impatient signals for?'

'Come and look at my new hat, Tot; such a love! the feather is perfect! As soon as Miss Crashawe comes I shall have to go down to my music-lesson, and I shan't be able to play a note unless I get that hat off my mind.'

'Be quick, then; it won't do to make Crashy cross.' So saying she slipped her arm round Amy's waist, and they went into her mother's room, where the new treasure was.

The Bruces and the Middletons were near neighbours. Amy Bruce had four brothers, all but one of whom were engaged in business during the greater part of the day, and being the only girl she was consequently a little inclined to presume upon her position. Her natural aptitude for study, and, indeed, her quickness in all she undertook, won golden opinions from the principal of the young ladies' college she attended. She stood well in all her classes, though, strange to say, she was not first in any, and her parents and brothers were very proud of her.

Charlotte, or Tottie Middleton, as she was usually called, had been Amy's dearest friend for the four or five years since the Bruces came to live at the Elms. She was fifteen, nearly a year older than Amy, and at the top of all their classes.

This, however, in spite of Amy's ambitious spirit, provoked no rivalry between the two girls. She had always looked up to Tottie, both physically and mentally, and was content to worship her as queen of the school, provided she, in her turn, could only maintain her supremacy over the other girls.

'There!' exclaimed Amy, taking the hat from the box and turning it round on her hand for inspection.

'That is a beauty! what a lovely feather! Amy, you are a lucky girl.'

'I suppose I am.'

'For goodness sake, don't pretend indifference! Put it on.'

The rich brown velvet and curly feather were certainly very becoming to her pretty bright complexion and fair hair.

'It suits you to a T,' pronounced Tottie generously, adding, with a shade of regret, 'I believe I shall have to make shift with the one I had last winter.'

'Oh, Tottie!'

'Mamma said something about having the feather recurled. It won't trouble me much, only this of yours will rather take the shine out of mine; and now the Prestwicks have come to live at Warnleigh Chase one naturally wants to put one's best foot forward. Talking of hats, though, have you seen the new girl yet?'

'No, my cold kept me away all last week. Have you?'

Tottie's shoulders and eyebrows rose simultaneously. 'I have.'

'What is she like?'

'To begin with, she is about so high;' and Tottie crouched down till her head was barely higher than the back of the chair.

'Short?'

'Stumpy, and dressed in the queerest, most frumpish style you can possibly imagine. They say she is very clever.'

'Fair or dark?'

'Black as Erebus! The Soanes are funny people, so I have heard.'

'What family is there?'

'Mr. Soane and some lady; but whether his wife or his sister I don't know. She is a grumpy-looking party, so Tilly tells me.'

'Amy,' called Mrs. Bruce from the hall, 'Miss Crashawe is waiting;' and hurriedly saying good-bye, Tottie took her leave, while Amy descended at once to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER II.

NORAH SOANE.

THE curtains were drawn cosily over the large bow-window of the dining-room at Hope Villa when Norah Soane came in sight of the house. It was a bleak autumn afternoon that would have made most people long for the warm fireside and a quiet evening's work, after tea had charmed away all the troubles and weariness of the day. But Norah had no such pleasant anticipations; the bright fire that flickered so invitingly through the crimson hangings suggested no thought of welcome to her; and cold and dreary as the outer world was, she would willingly have walked twice as far to postpone the chilling, formal reception that awaited her.

The Soanes had but recently removed to Westborough. The autumn term at Miss Simpson's had only just commenced; as yet Norah had had no opportunity of making friends, and so far as her present experience went, her schoolfellows seemed the most exclusive, disagreeable set she had ever come across. Barely eighteen months had passed since Mrs. Soane died, leaving Norah and her brother at an age when they most needed a mother's care. Under any circumstances this would have been a terrible trouble for the boy and girl, who were devotedly attached to their mother.

Their father, a man of strict integrity and principle, was stern and hard to them ; all the love of which he appeared capable having been lavished on his wife. He provided liberally for his children, however, and during their mother's lifetime her care had made ample amends for his lack of tenderness. Her death, therefore, was a cruel blow, and they realized then all they had lost.

Norah was thirteen, Arthur rather more than a year older. It was vain for them to seek sympathy or consolation from their father. In his selfish grief he had no thought for them, and every attempt to win his love was received with cold surprise almost amounting to displeasure.

They soon learned that to keep out of his way was their wisest course. Even this, doubly hard as it rendered their loss, would have grown endurable after a while. But unfortunately Norah was too young to keep house for her father, and no sooner had the violence of his sorrow subsided, than just before the removal to Westborough, he wrote for his sister, a widow some ten years his senior, to come and take the reins of domestic government.

Mrs. Barson was a person of whom Norah had always stood in great awe. Two or three formal visits made a few years back had left a very unpleasant impression upon her childish memory ; and she felt sure her mother had been as glad as she was when they came to an end, though Mrs. Soane had been careful not to breathe a word of the kind to her little daughter.

In spite, however, of the dislike with which Norah heard of the expected arrival of this aunt, she determined dutifully to give her an affectionate

welcome ; and not only to be obedient herself, but also to try and persuade Arthur to submit patiently to Mrs. Barson's authority. This was more easily resolved on than accomplished. Arthur, though by no means a bad boy, was wayward and a trifle obstinate, and after some hard struggles for mastery on both sides, Mrs. Barson easily prevailed on her brother to send him away to boarding school.

This was a hard trial for both, especially for Norah. Now indeed she recognised how lonely she was. Arthur would only come home for the Midsummer and Christmas vacations ; their father had even threatened that he should spend his holidays at school if he did not behave better than he had done in the summer time, and Norah was looking forward with almost more dread than pleasure to the approaching festive season. It was now about six weeks to Christmas ; Arthur had been away nearly five months ; they had never been separated so long before—he had not even seen their new house yet—and to Norah's impatient heart it seemed as if the time would never pass.

But the wind was so biting it did not tempt her to saunter. She was soon at the garden gate, and, swinging it to with a sigh, walked briskly up the path.

'Is that you, Norah?' inquired a sharp voice from the dining-room, the door of which stood ajar.

'Yes, aunt.'

'You are late.'

'Am I, aunt?'

'Don't be saucy, miss! You know you are late as well as I do. What have you been doing?'

By this time Norah had pulled off her ulster, and meekly entered the room.

'Miss Simpson was arranging about the drawing class, aunt.'

'Oh! so that is what has kept you. Why did you not say so at once? Have I not often told you that prevarication is next door to falsehood?'

Experience had taught Norah that it was useless to argue.

'Have you changed your boots?'

'No, aunt; they are not dirty, the roads are quite dry.'

'How dare you tread on the carpet in your walking boots? Wet or dry, you know it is against the rule.'

'I only came in to tell you why I was late, aunt; I did not think that would matter.'

'It turns out, then, you did know you were late. Why did you not say so before?'

Poor Norah's eyes filled with tears, but she made no answer.

'You will not gain anything by sulking. I told your mother years ago she would spoil you. I foresaw clearly what the result would be. Change your boots directly, fold your things neatly and put them away, and then practise your scales till tea-time. It is of no use trying these airs on me; I warn you that! Your father shall hear of this rude, obstinate conduct. Go at once. What are you waiting for?'

The words of self-justification that trembled on Norah's lips died away, and she turned to do her aunt's bidding in silence. This, however, was not in accordance with Mrs. Barson's notions of strict

submission, and she had scarcely reached the door when her aunt's voice, harder and severer, if possible, than ever, stopped her.

'Did you hear what I said?'

'Yes, aunt.'

'And pray do you consider it proper behaviour to strut out of the room without vouchsafing me a single word? I tell you, miss, I will not bear such rudeness; I will be treated with respect. Go to your practice instantly, and do not come down till I send for you; you have wasted quite enough time.'

'Yes, aunt,' was the meek reply; and having at last made good her escape, Norah sat down to the piano.

Up and down—up and down the cold keyboard,—scale after scale with the most unremitting perseverance. There was no fire, and the low flame turned on from one burner of the gaselier made no perceptible difference to the temperature in the room; her fingers smarted, but she feared to disobey her aunt. Once or twice she half rose, thinking she would go and warm her hands, and ask how long tea would be. Then Mrs. Barson's threat, 'Your father shall hear of this rude, obstinate conduct,' recurred to her, and she sat down again and went on droning away mechanically at those wearisome scales.

'It is a long time since papa came in,' thought she. 'I am sure that was his knock, and hark!'

She left off playing and listened as the jingle of tea-things caught her ear.

'Is that Martha carrying in tea? or—is she clearing away?'

A flush of indignation mounted to her cheeks. Springing from the music-stool, she ran to the landing and looked down into the hall. Martha was just coming out with the crumb-tray.

'Martha!' cried she; 'has papa finished tea?'

'Yes, miss,' returned the maid, dropping her voice; 'and you'd better come and have some along with me, if you don't mind. There's some nice toast left, and I'll take care you have a hot cup of tea. You must be perished with cold up there, without a spark of fire in the grate, a nasty black frost as it is to-night. I call it a regular shame, I do. Ah! I guess who would be angry if she was here to see it; but there, fathers are not mothers.'

This sympathetic remark was too much for Norah, and sitting down on the chair the good-tempered Martha placed by the kitchen fire, she burst into tears.

'Law, now, don't cry; put your feet on the fender while I set the toast to hot on the oven, and you'll be every bit as comfortable as if you were in there along of old cross-patch; for that's what *she* is, aunt or no aunt.'

The genial glow of the fire and Martha's cheery talk soon restored Norah's composure. She dried her eyes, drank a cup of tea, and ate her share of the well-buttered toast.

'I should like some bread and butter, Martha,' said she, presently; 'the sharp air has made me quite hungry.'

'Hm!' ejaculated the girl. 'No wonder, too, waiting all this while. I'll toast some more. I could do with another piece myself.'

So saying, she cut a round of bread, and sticking it on the fork, held it to the bright, clear fire.

The second side was scorched a nice golden brown, and she was just laying it on the hot dish to butter, when the kitchen door opened, and Mrs. Barson appeared on the threshold.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. BARSON'S DECREE.

NORAH was so warm and comfortable, and the fresh toast smelt so appetising, that she had forgotten all about her aunt. It was seldom that Mrs. Barson went into the kitchen after tea; but as soon as Mr. Soane had buried himself in his arm-chair and the evening paper, as was his wont when the day's work was over, the good lady began to miss the monotonous running up and down on the pianoforte, and to wonder what had become of that perverse Norah. So laying aside her knitting, Mrs. Barson was betaking herself to the drawing-room, when the sound of talking arrested her. 'Surely Martha had not ventured to ask a friend in without permission.' Hastily descending to the lower regions, she discovered the self-willed maid in the heinous act of buttering the round of toast she had just made.

Norah started and nearly upset her cup. Martha kept her ground, spreading the toast with a defiant, business-like air.

'What are you doing, Martha?' demanded Mrs. Barson angrily.

'Having my tea, ma'am,' stolidly answered she.

'And pray what business have you here?' asked Mrs. Barson, turning to Norah.

'If you please, ma'am, Miss Norah is having hers

along with me. Finding she didn't come down, I thought it was high time she had some, sitting up there in that damp room, and she a bit weak on the chest, as the doctor said the last cold she had.'

'Have the goodness to wait till you are asked before you interfere with what does not concern you,' answered Mrs. Barson. 'As for you, Norah, wish your papa good-night, and go to bed immediately.'

'It is only seven, aunt,' remonstrated Norah, glancing at the clock. 'I have my lessons to prepare.'

'You will learn in future to mind when you are spoken to.'

'But, aunt, it will throw me back dreadfully if I do not look over them. Please don't send me to bed; indeed I did not intend to be disobedient. I did not know you meant me to have no tea.'

'You have a strange way of showing your obedience,' sneered her aunt.

'Mamma never kept me without my meals,' said Norah tearfully. 'Please, aunt, let me do my work.'

'Your mamma was a very different person to me, miss, as you will find to your cost. She had many ways of which I entirely disapprove. Do as I bid you this instant, and let me have no more arguing about it.'

With a heavy heart Norah went upstairs. Her first impulse was to appeal to her father, but when she entered the room her courage failed. He looked so stern and cold that she waited some

minutes before she even ventured on a timid 'Good-night, papa.'

'Good-night,' answered he, without raising his eyes from the paper; and Norah hurried away.

As she passed through the hall she caught sight of her school-books strapped in a neat pack, as she had brought them home. Seizing them, she ran up to her room at the top of the house, locked the door, unfastened the books and began to make the best of her time.

But her mind was so perturbed she could not fix her thoughts on a single sentence; besides, it was so cold, and she had only had half her tea when Mrs. Barson interrupted her. Martha's toast looked and smelt so tantalizingly nice too.

'It is not as if I had done anything wrong,' said she to herself; 'but aunt is so severe and cross. Oh! mamma, mamma, why did God take you away from me and Arthur? Poor Arthur! we were so happy together. How can I possibly be ready for my classes? This work must be done somehow. I will get into bed; it will be so much better there, and perhaps aunt will not send Martha to put the gas out yet.'

In a few minutes she was comfortably propped up with the bolster and pillows, spreading her books out before her on the counterpane.

'I am glad I thought of getting into bed,' said she to herself. 'I should be quite comfortable now if I were not rather hungry. I suppose I ought not to have come down till aunt sent for me; still, I cannot see that I had done any wrong. What makes aunt so cross? Was I rude?'

A gentle tap startled her. Before she could say

'Come in' the door opened, and Martha popped her head in. It was one of Mrs. Barson's rules that Norah should always unlock her door when she got into bed.

'That's right, miss, you'll be ever so much warmer in bed,' said the kind-hearted girl, whisking her muslin apron off the small waiter she held in her hand. 'I made up my mind you shouldn't be done out of your tea, and here's a nice hot cup and some toast that I kept covered close in the oven till Mrs. Barson settled to her knitting again; and if you'll eat it at once, miss, I'll take the things down, lest there should be another rumpus.'

As soon as Norah had finished the hasty meal, Martha said,—

'I'll come and turn the gas out at the usual time, so you can have a good read at your books;' and away she pattered downstairs with the empty cup and plate.

Norah, who was naturally studious and ambitious, was soon so heart and soul in her work that all her troubles were forgotten, and she went on storing up rules, facts, dates, with perhaps greater assiduity than any of those with whom she was competing. It was not Miss Simpson's rule to put a new girl into the first class on entering the school, however showy her attainments might appear. 'Glib tongues generally went with shallow pates,' as she pithily expressed it. But Norah had answered so well in her preliminary examination, she had betrayed such a sound knowledge of every subject on which she had been questioned, that Miss Simpson was convinced it would be a sheer waste of time to put her back, and she had forth-

with taken her place at once in the senior classes, in all of which she stood either second or third from the top, to the great envy of the others, who regarded 'the new girl' with unmitigated disfavour.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. PRESTWICK'S TIMELY ARRIVAL.

THE next morning was bright and crisp. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the hoar frost sparkled in the sunshine. The fields were white; hedges, trees, everything wore a glittering fringe when Amy Bruce danced down the drive under the tall old elms to the gate. Tottie and Lillie Middleton were just in sight, there was plenty of time—Amy was never late for school—and she ran to meet them full of life and spirits.

‘Isn't it splendid?’ cried she.

‘What is splendid?’ asked Tottie.

‘The day—the frost. Look at the trees!’

‘It is just like fairyland!’ exclaimed Lillie, rapturously.

‘I wish it had not set in so soon,’ grumbled Tottie. ‘Papa says it won't last; and if it does, there will be no skating, for there is no water out yet.’

‘Ah! that would be a pity. I love skating, though I am not so grand at it as you are, Tot.’

‘It is not wise to forestall pleasure or sorrow,’ said Lillie thoughtfully.

‘What a sententious remark!’ exclaimed her sister, laughing merrily. ‘Did you ever come near such a queer girl as Lil?’

'More sound than sense in it, so far as pleasure goes. Why, Lil?' asked Amy.

Before Lillie could answer, a timely distraction diverted the two elder girls, and spared her the difficulty of defending her assertion.

'Look, Amy! there she is.'

'Who, Tot? the new girl?'

'No other—Miss Soane—Miss Norah Soane, if you please, young ladies,' said Tottie, with an unmistakably ironical emphasis on the Christian name.

'Irish,' suggested Amy.

'Unquestionably! I call it a shame—an out-and-out shame that a stranger—a young *person* of her stamp—should be launched straightway among us.'

'It certainly is not fair of Miss Simpson to break through her rule; it is not fair to us.'

'She has never done such a thing for any one before.'

'But what makes you call her a young *person*, Tot?'

'Oh, every one says the Soanes are nobodies. Fancy people of any pretensions screwing into a poky little place like Hope Villa!'

'I thought Lady Doughton used to live there,' said Lillie innocently.

'So she did, you little silly; but then *she* was as poor as a church mouse. Do look at that girl, Amy; did ever you see such a figure?'

Norah Soane was so far from being a beauty, that most people would have set her down at once as plain. She was short, and bade fair to be thickset, and her dark sallow complexion was not improved by a long scar on the left cheek

from a burn received in childhood. On a closer acquaintance, however, her well-cut features and handsome dark eyes redeemed her face from anything approaching ugliness, while the profusion of silky black hair, twisted in a tight coil on the nape of her neck, had already provoked the envy of half the school.

'I call it downright rude of Miss Simpson,' said Amy Bruce.

'I can't see what difference it will make to you,' said Lillie gently. 'If Miss Soane is advanced enough for the first class, it would be dreadful for the second girls to have her over them.'

'Do hold your tongue, Lil! you make me quite cross. I'm certain all the senior girls feel quite as strongly as Amy and I do about having her among them.'

'Why, Tot, *you* are not afraid of her, are you?'

'Afraid! what stuff you talk, Lil!' answered Tottie indignantly. 'I should like to see the girl who steps over my head.'

'What possesses her to wear that flat, low-crowned pork-pie hat?' said Amy, as soon as they were close enough to Norah to dissect her attire.

'She wants to be consistent, I suppose. Dominies and bookworms always keep to one pattern. I wonder when the Prestwicks' party will come off.'

'Ah! will she get asked?'

'Amy! how can you be so absurd? As if Mrs. Prestwick would ever think of introducing that girl among her set.'

'Well, Tottie, you know *all* the first girls have had cards, ever since Ellinor Prestwick has been

one of us. Miss Simpson must consider Norah Soane a lady, or she would not have admitted her.'

'There are ladies and ladies,' pompously answered Tottie, bridling her head. 'I daresay she is one of the shabby-genteel sort, who will have to make capital of her acquirements by-and-by. It's generally the case with your clever, pushing girls, who work their way above everybody else. They know their bread and butter will depend on their wits, and that puts the edge on. Knives to grind, scissors to grind !' laughed she, dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper, as they overtook the object of their derision.

Aware that she was being followed by some of her schoolfellows, and thinking they might perchance be desirous of improving the acquaintance, Norah had slackened her pace. Their chilling behaviour in class, and sundry covert *signs* they had exchanged, had not escaped her ; but she was too much in need of companionship to create a feud for the want of a little forbearance ; so, without even turning her head, or making any pretence of delaying, she lingered a little to give them an opportunity of coming up. Before long, however, she perceived they had not the slightest intention of recognising her. They were no sooner within a few yards, than they suddenly relaxed their speed, and she could hear plainly that they were merely following instead of trying to catch up to her. From time to time whispered remarks and suppressed titters made her feel very uncomfortable, for though not a word they said reached her, she was sure she was being quizzed.

She did her best to assume an easy, indifferent

air, as if she had no suspicion that she was the object of their ill-mannered mirth, though she felt all the while that they were amusing themselves at her expense. But this soon became little short of torture, and a few 'Did you evers?' from Tottie, followed by 'No, really,' and one or two similar exclamations, drove her to the verge of endurance.

She was just meditating a desperate effort to outstrip them, when Mrs. Prestwick's wagonette turned the corner of the road.

Before she had time to think or do anything, it drew up by the path, and she saw Mrs. Prestwick smilingly beckoning her to approach.

Norah's astonishment, great as it was, was small compared with that of the other girls, who were but a few yards behind.

The Prestwicks were bankers, and generally looked up to. Warnleigh was a fine property, and a nod from the lady of the Chase was regarded quite as a subject for congratulation.

As the wagonette came in sight, the three young ladies, bridling their heads, quieting themselves into decorousness and unconsciously quickening their pace, had advanced—one and all, with eyes riveted on Mrs. Prestwick, ready to catch the salutation each was determined if possible to appropriate. To their mortification, just as they were preparing themselves for the most approved of boarding-school bows, they became aware that it was the despised Norah who was the object of Mrs. Prestwick's attention, and that both she and Ellinor were so much engrossed that they barely recognised the Middletons in time to return an absent nod.

'I call that downright rude!' exclaimed Tottie indignantly, as soon as they were out of hearing.

'I'm sure Mrs. Prestwick didn't mean it,' answered Lillie, half turning her head to look back.

'Mean it! I daresay not. But just as if we were not of sufficient importance to be remembered! Pray don't let the Prestwicks see you staring after them, Lillie. After all, the Chase is not theirs, they only rent it.'

Amy laughed.

'Of course not, Tottie. Well, I don't blame Mrs. Prestwick so much, but I think Ellinor might have seen us coming.'

'To cut us so, for that sooty-haired, squatty Norah Soane, dressed like nobody else in the world! I declare she looks nothing beside Laura Bright or Mary Clark in their Sunday best.'

This provoked a general titter.

Laura Bright was the daughter of a small dealer *in greengrocery and sweets*, and Mary Clark assisted a fat old aunt who took in washing. Both girls made themselves conspicuous by the showiness of their attire and their clumsy attempts at style.

'I would rather any day dress like Norah,' said Lillie; 'if her clothes are shabby and out of date, they are modest and ladylike.'

'You make a point of standing up for all the eccentricities, Lillie,' exclaimed Tottie pettishly. 'I should be glad to know what your idea of a lady is.'

Lillie coloured slightly. She was a gentle, amiable girl, and often felt grieved at her sister's harsh, jeering ways and words.

'A lady,' began she, after a minute's hesitation, 'should always try to be in harmony with her surroundings; she should dress——'

'In sage green or sober grey, like the forest trees or the slate quarries,' interrupted Tottie with a sneer.

'Or the clouds,' suggested Amy Bruce. 'You might go a long way to find a slate-quarry in this neighbourhood.'

'Thank you for the suggestion, Amy,' said Lillie good-temperedly. 'We are never long without clouds, you know. Well, my pattern lady shall not literally be condemned to cloud-greys or dull greens, but she shall avoid flaring colours and flaunting styles; she shall——'

'Keep to neat housemaid costumes,' suggested Tottie.

'Anything simple and graceful, Tot.'

'The dowdier the better. Dear me, child,' ejaculated Tottie, eyeing her with amusement, and emphasizing the 'child' very crushingly—'I had no idea you piqued yourself on being a critic in such matters. Pray, do you intend to go in for modern dress reform?'

'Don't be absurd, Tot; you know very well I don't,' answered Lillie.

But just at that moment the sound of wheels stopped the sarcastic words that were on Tottie's lips, and Mrs. Prestwick's wagonette rolled past with Norah Soane—sooty-haired, squatty, sawn-faced Norah Soane—sitting opposite to the lady of the Chase—actually sitting side by side with the much-envied, much-sought-after Ellinor.

Recognising them now, Mrs. Prestwick bowed

graciously, Ellinor gave them a friendly nod, and Norah a timid one as she was whirled by; but she was too deeply interested in what Ellinor was saying to trouble herself much about past slights just then.

Tottie bit her lip with vexation.

'Well!' exclaimed she, after they had watched the carriage in silence till it disappeared. 'What they can see in that girl puzzles me! A pretty conceited young party Mrs. Prestwick will make of her, take my word for it! If she has turned back for the express purpose of driving her to school, I think the least she could have done would have been to take us all up.'

'There was plenty of room,' said Amy.

'I don't know that we especially want to ride this morning,' said her sister.

Lillie was one of those happy-tempered girls who are not perpetually craving for notice, nor on the look-out for slights. She would always far rather pass over even an intentional unkindness than nurse it up to fret away her peace of mind.

'*You* don't,' retorted Tottie in a snarling tone. 'You never do want anything that anybody else does.'

'I am sure it will do us good to walk through this beautiful frosty air,' persisted Lillie. 'We might even find driving rather cold work.'

'Rubbish!' cried Tottie.

'The grapes are sour, Lillie,' said Amy, laughing. 'A quick whisk like that would never make anybody cold.'

Amy was scarcely less astonished than Tottie at the rapid stride Norah had made in Mrs. Prest-

wick's favour, but there was this difference between them : with Tottie envy had provoked spite ; with Amy Bruce it had simply had the effect of making her think more highly of Norah.

Tottie was extremely ambitious, and like most ambitious people greedy of notice and praise. Everything she did was possibly done, in the first place, for the pure love of the thing itself ; but it was done with the inseparable consciousness that cleverness would bring admiration, and she wanted to be admired.

Small and limited as her sphere was, fame was the shrine at which she worshipped, the goal towards which all her efforts were directed. She was naturally quick, though not so thorough as some of her more plodding companions, and the facility with which she grasped the main points of a subject, combined with an excellent memory, had soon put her at the head of all her classes.

This natural aptitude was rapidly developing into superficiality, which had already begun to leave its evil traces upon her character. From an innocent aiming after perfection in the several branches of study she had taken up, she had reached a spirit of emulation by no means desirable. She had entered the lists, not against the studies themselves, but against her rival classmates ; and the best, the holiest qualities of her nature were falling under it ; kindness, gentleness, scrupulousness, honour, were all fast giving way before her overweening ambition.

‘ By that sin fell the angels ; how then shall man,
Though the image of his Maker, hope to win by it ? ’

Tottie was treading a dangerous path. Besides the baneful effect so unchristian a contest was exercising over her better self, she was rapidly degenerating into carelessness, since the very ease with which all her work was prepared frequently enabled her to answer by mere parrot memory questions which had made no lasting impression upon her mind, questions which in fact she very imperfectly understood.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMPETITION.

IT was nearly a month later. The dark mornings and long evenings were coming on apace, December was following in the train of its gloomy predecessor, and the winter threatened to be unusually severe. The weather-wise old country farmers and shepherds for miles around prophesied snow before long, and the village coal and clothing clubs had more members than they had boasted for years. Freezing mists, biting winds and black frosts succeeded one another. But Beauty had not forgotten her mission on the earth. The scarlet berries of the holly looked brighter than ever through the rime that hung so heavily round its dark prickly leaves, and the sparrows, with feathers fluffed up against the cold, hopped disconsolately about the hard ground, picking up a grain here or a crumb there, or routing in holes and corners for poor half-frozen grubs in their winter quarters.

The sun was just above the horizon when Lillie Middleton drew the blind aside and looked out. She and Tottie had dressed by candle-light, as they always did now, but she loved to peep at the old church tower before she went downstairs, to see the new day on which they were entering.

'Oh, Tottie, how lovely!' exclaimed she.

'What's that?' cried her sister, struggling into her dress at the other side of the room.

There had been a heavy fall of snow during the night, and the trees were bending beneath their flaky burdens.

'Do come and look, Tottie.'

'I can't, Lil; that is the warning bell ringing, and my dress is not hooked yet.'

'It is so deep; the ivy on the church tower is splendidly white, and the sun is like a crimson ball.'

'Snow!' ejaculated Tottie, shivering; 'that will spoil the skating.'

'Well, Tot, we are in no hurry for skating yet. We shall not have much time for that before the holidays begin.'

'No, that is true. Amy Bruce says Ellinor Prestwick has invited her to come on their great lake.'

'That is if it freezes.'

'Of course, you goose. I wonder whether she will ask us.'

'I hope so.'

Then having knelt for a few moments by her bedside, Lillie hurried downstairs with her sister, who was ready just as the bell sounded for morning prayers.

During the past few weeks the excitement in Westborough had risen to a very high pitch, at least among the young ladies of Miss Simpson's college.

In the first place, the holidays were not far off; and as most of the girls had brothers or cousins who always spent Christmas with them, this alone

was sufficient to fill their hearts with joyful expectations. Then there was the break-up to look forward to, and Mrs. Prestwick's party also figured largely in their thoughts. Of course they would be asked. Ellinor had invited them before, and they had already settled in anticipation what they should wear and all about the whole matter. But in addition to such frivolities there was something else that for the present engrossed them still more, and for which all were striving their very utmost. The vicar's aunt—an octogenarian—a bishop's sister and rich into the bargain, had offered a prize of five guineas for the best copy in water colours of an oil painting, 'Mount Olivet from the walls of Jerusalem,' which hung in the vicarage dining-room. This painting was so great a favourite with the old lady that she had prevailed on her nephew to lend it for the purpose. The adjudication of the prize was to be committed to Miss Simpson, the drawing-master and herself; the work was to be fairly done, under the master's instruction, but entirely unassisted by him; one of the express conditions being that the smallest touch from his hand should at once disqualify any *replica* for the competition. Several of the girls possessed considerable artistic talent, and all in the first class were eager to try their skill. Every moment that could be spared from their other studies was devoted to Mount Olivet.

Amy Bruce, Tottie Middleton, Ellinor Prestwick and the much-despised Norah Soane were foremost among the number. Of late an acquaintance, or rather, a lame friendship had sprung up between Tottie and Amy and Norah. Ellinor

Prestwick patronized her, and they were not to be outdone by Ellinor. This friendship was, however, especially on Tottie's part, a very unsound one. Hitherto she had been at the top of every class; now Norah was rapidly stepping over her head. In spite of the arrogant contempt with which she professed to regard Norah, who was nearly a year younger than herself, it was plain that she was afraid of her. Norah's quickness and thoroughness were rapidly entitling her not only to the respect of her schoolfellows, but to that of her masters; and her modest, unassuming ways had already won her several friends.

'Make haste, Lillie, we shall be late,' said Tottie, as they ran down the garden path; 'there is Amy on before us, with that horrid Norah too, I declare.'

'I think Norah is a very nice girl, Tot. What makes you always find such fault with her?'

'I am not *always* finding fault with her, miss *contrary*; but it is not to be expected that I should feel very glowing towards any girl who is pushing herself in by pushing everybody else out.'

'Oh, Tottie! I am sure she doesn't mean to do that. She can't help being clever, and there is another thing I like about her, she never makes ill-natured remarks about other people.'

'People that ride in coaches of glass mustn't throw stones at those who pass,' jeered Tottie; 'I should like to hear *her* saying ugly things about any of the girls. Old Tawny, indeed! What could she see worse than *herself* in a single one in the first class, not even excepting Mary Procter, with her shaggy yellow mane.'

'How can you call Norah ugly, Tot? I thought

yesterday, when she was showing her picture to Mr. Husken, that she looked quite handsome. Don't you think hers will be the best ?'

'Clatter, clatter!' answered her sister with a frown ; ' we must catch up with those girls, or we shall be late.'

CHAPTER VI.

MEANING HINTS.

MATTERS had been going on with tolerable smoothness at Hope Villa since poor Norah fell into such unmerited disgrace. She had been extremely careful not to irritate her aunt, and so many things had occurred to occupy Mrs. Barson that she had not been quite so ingenious in inventing causes for displeasure. Norah was very grateful for the respite. School had always been an unfailing source of pleasure to her; but this drawing prize was altogether an unlooked-for stimulus to exertion, and she had entered into the competition with spirit, for the pure delight of painting, without an envious or unkind feeling towards one of her companions. Not that she expected to win the prize; scarcely in her most sanguine moments did her hopes rise so high as that; but it was something to work for. Like most serious-thinking girls, Norah felt keenly the want of some definite aim, even in her school duties; for though life with its myriad responsibilities need never be purposeless, 'the daily round, the common task' seldom offer the same incentive to effort that we find in striving after some fixed goal, especially if it be in conjunction with others.

Norah had not failed to perceive the coldness,

sometimes almost amounting to rudeness, with which the other girls treated her. She was at a loss to imagine the cause of this, for she had never in any way provoked their malice, either by unkind retorts or by thrusting herself unsought upon them. Their slights often gave her great pain, but she was too amiable to retaliate, and endured them with true Christian meekness, endeavouring to win the girls' love by her forbearance and her readiness to help whenever it lay in her power. Was one of them pushed for time? Norah was willing to assist her by any legitimate means; had she forgotten a fact or a date? Norah would prompt her, though by so doing she rendered her own chance of keeping at the top of the class the more uncertain. Strangely enough, however, this seemed only to embitter the girls against her. Amy Bruce was for ever flaunting her new dresses, ribbons, gloves, in opposition to Norah's shabby ones, and Tottie owed her an open grudge for usurping her place at the top of all their classes.

'Thank goodness! the holidays will soon be here,' exclaimed Tottie one dull, foggy afternoon, as they started to go home.

Hope Villa lay in the same direction as the Elms, so they had no excuse for giving Norah the slip, and Ellinor Prestwick was so polite and considerate to all her companions that in a measure they were driven into following the example set them by the daughter of the great nabob of the place.

'I should be almost sorry, were it not that they will bring Arthur with them,' said Norah.

Tottie looked round, as much as to say, 'What

in the world made you take that remark to yourself ?'

'Is Arthur your brother ?' asked Lillie.

'Yes ; he has been away ever since the summer.'

'I daresay you will soon want to be rid of him again,' said Tottie bluntly.

'Rid of Arthur ! I am counting the days till he comes. Why ?'

'Oh, well, perhaps the least said the soonest mended. He is a very troublesome boy, isn't he ?'

'Boys will be troublesome, you know, Tottie ; but Miss Soane must be glad to see her brother sometimes, in spite of that,' put in Amy, making things worse still by her blundering kindness.

Norah's sallow face flushed.

'Arthur is not troublesome,' began she.

'Oh, no !—of course—I forgot—I beg your pardon, Miss Soane. I thought, from something our man told us, that—— Pray let us change the subject,' answered Tottie.

Norah, burning to defend her brother, but not knowing what to say, walked on in silence, deeply mortified. The story of Arthur's disgrace had evidently been magnified and published all over the place, and these scandal-loving schoolfellows of hers would glory in repeating it to every one. She wanted to justify Arthur, but how could she do so without knowing what they had heard ? and a very pardonable feeling of pride made her shrink from exposing herself to the ridicule of the two girls, whose side glances and suppressed merriment left her no doubt that they were taking an unworthy pleasure in her discomfiture. So much absorbed

was she in wondering how best to convince them of the falsity of the tales they had been told, that several very pointed insinuations escaped her, and she suddenly became aware that the prize was the subject now on hand.

'Nonsense, Amy! you don't suppose that you or I have the shadow of a chance,' Tottie was saying.

'Why not?' inquired Amy innocently.

'Miss Simpson and Mr. Husken will take care of that; the competition is purely nominal, any one with a grain of sense knows that.'

'What do you mean, Tot?'

'Why, can't you see through the whole farce? Of course for our own credit's sake we are bound to try our utmost; but Ellinor Prestwick will carry off the prize.'

'Oh, Tottie!' exclaimed Amy with genuine honesty, 'Miss Simpson would never be so unfair.'

'Miss Simpson will not have the slightest scruple or twinge on the subject,' answered Tottie confidently, watching Norah like a cat does a mouse. 'She knows her own interest too well to trouble herself about such old-world fables as Conscience or Justice. Take my word for it, the former is provided with a patent strainer, warranted to bolt camels comfortably; and the latter wears such easy slippers that she can kick them off at any moment.'

Tottie felt that Norah's dark eyes were fixed on her as she spoke.

'Oh, Tottie! how can you say so?' exclaimed Lillie. 'I am sure Miss Simpson is too good to act so.'

'What do you know about it, Lillie? I am talking to Amy, not to you. Amy knows what I say is true; don't you, Amy?' added she, with a slight nudge of the elbow and a significant glance at Norah.

But Amy was not so devoid of principle as to give unqualified assent to all her friend said. Fond as she was of the merry, unscrupulous Tottie, this was not the first time that she had been shocked at her tricky, untruthful ways. She was, however, too much in awe of her to disagree openly, and took refuge in evasion, like many who have not courage to withdraw their support from a falsehood.

'Tastes differ,' said she; 'but there can only be one opinion about the pictures. Any one can see with their eyes half-open that Ellinor's is not the best.'

'Your language, my dear, is "unparliamentary," as they express it in the House, not to say imprudent,' answered Tottie, with a meaning look at Norah.

'I am sure, Tot, no one here would think of repeating anything so rude and unkind,' said Lillie.

'Of course not, Lil! What an outrageous little innocent, though, you must be to credit everybody with your own angelic disinterestedness!' answered her sister with a shade of *pique*.

'Who do you really think will gain the prize, Tottie?'

'Don't ask me. If there is one thing I am positive about, it is that it does not depend on merit.'

'I wouldn't have anything at all to do with it if I thought that,' said Lillie candidly; 'but time will show.'

Just at this moment they reached the corner where Norah's road diverged from theirs, and wishing her a more gushing good-bye than usual, they parted. It was impossible for Norah not to see that some hidden motive lay at the bottom of these hints and innuendoes. What it could be she was at a loss to conjecture. Sometimes in the innocence of her own heart she was inclined to believe it was simply jealousy of Ellinor's position that made Tottie so positive the prize would be awarded to her; sometimes, after a careful study of the unfinished pictures, pride began to whisper in her heart,—

'Yours is far the best; Tottie knows it, and is trying to discourage you.'

Then a feeling of bitterness would arise, and she could not help reverting to the many unkind, spiteful words she had overheard at different times—words she could not but take to herself.

'Swarthy, stumpy,' there was not another girl in the school to whom such epithets could apply.

Many a heavy sigh did she breathe when she got into her room that afternoon, as she looked at her face in the glass.

The clumsy, old-fashioned cut of her dress, the plain countrified hat with which Mrs. Barson had provided her, seemed uglier and shabbier than ever.

Almost all the girls had taken to their winter suits. Tottie had been even more well-satisfied than usual in a new dark-brown velvet hat, with a

curly feather, that she had put on for the first time that day.

'Who could look anything but dowdy in such a fright of a thing?' exclaimed Norah, holding her old black straw pork-pie hat at arm's length in her left hand, and scanning it with mournful discontent. 'I have worn it winter and summer for nearly two years; the velvet is quite rusty, and the shape is quite gone out. It is not fair of aunt to make a laughing-stock of me because of her antiquated whims.'

There was a wrathful twitch in her plump right hand as she laid the hat down on the bed.

Poor Norah! she was beginning to feel *very* much aggrieved.

'I am more than half a mind to knock it in!' said she aloud, sparring viciously at the crown. 'I should be obliged to have a new one then.'

She started, for there, just behind her, stood Mrs. Barson. She had heard Norah's involuntary soliloquy as she was going downstairs to make tea, and had noiselessly opened the door, thinking to catch her in the heinous crime of asking one of her schoolfellows up without permission.

'A new one indeed, miss!' exclaimed she, in a sharp, hard voice. 'Take care how you give way to such wicked tempers. I warn you you shall have no other, whatever you may do to it.'

Norah had shrunk back, for though Mrs. Barson had never yet had recourse to blows, she had often threatened to box her ears on far less provocation. But all at once a sudden spirit of defiance seemed to come over her, and taking the hat she held it up.



'Don't you think I want a new one, aunt?' asked she humbly.

'Want a a new hat! What next, I wonder! Pray, what is the matter with it?'

Mrs. Barson stared at Norah, not at the hat.

'It is so shabby, aunt, and so old-fashioned; nobody wears these old turban shapes now. The crown is so low, it doesn't suit me at all. I feel quite wretched in it. You see the girls are always making such spiteful remarks, it is very hard to bear them day after day—and——'

Norah paused; she had grown almost piteously confidential, but there was a cold, quizzical expression on Mrs. Barson's face that arrested the flow of words.

'Have you done?' asked her aunt, after an ominous silence.

'I have had this one such a long while,' murmured she.

'The longer the better,' replied her aunt sternly. 'Pray understand, miss, once for all, that you will never get me to countenance you in your extravagance. A fine state the young people of this generation have come to, if schoolgirls are to be flaunting the latest Paris fashions every day in the week!'

'But, aunt——' began poor Norah.

'Hold your tongue, miss! I have no patience with such highty-flighty notions—laying a good hat aside because it happens to be of a different shape to Ellinor Prestwick's or Maggie Thompson's or some of the vain, empty-headed dolls you emulate.'

'Oh, aunt!' remonstrated Norah; 'Ellinor Prestwick is not an empty-headed doll.'

'Don't argue; I won't be contradicted, so I tell you! Your plain face will never look any the handsomer if you spend a fortune on it.'

'I have worn this old thing nearly two years,' expostulated Norah.

'Don't try to make it out more than it is,' rejoined Mrs. Barson tartly. 'You had the hat last Christmas twelvemonth. It was a fine straw, and the velvet was good, It pays best to have good things; they last so much longer. Let me look at the hat.'

Norah handed it to her in silence.

'I see nothing the matter with it,' said she, twisting it about and examining it critically. 'Put it on.'

Norah obeyed. Her aunt advanced a step, and taking her by the shoulder turned her round somewhat roughly.

'A very neat, modest-looking hat,' said she, after a severe scrutiny through her glasses. 'Any moderately well-looking girl would find it becoming enough. But you certainly are very plain, Norah; you are so much like your mother. I thought you told me the hat was shabby; why, it is scarcely the worse for wear. Norah, Norah Soane,' continued she, with increasing asperity, 'have I not many times warned you against that terrible habit of exaggeration—untruthfulness, I call it—to which you are so prone?'

It mattered little what the poor girl said, it was sure to be wrong somehow or another. Did she content herself with a bare statement of facts, she was either sly or sulky; if she went into details, Mrs. Barson accused her of 'throwing the hatchet.'

‘If you think you will make any impression on me, you are very much mistaken ; you are not the first ill-tempered girl I have had to do with. I tell you in advance you won’t get the upper hand.’

‘I am not ill tempered, aunt,’ began Norah, ready to cry.

‘Hold your tongue, miss ; you are a rude, ill-mannered, discontented girl ! I have made a great mistake in treating you so kindly ; severity is the only thing for such self-willed, conceited young minxes. I am quite out of patience with you.’

How long this scolding might have continued it is impossible to say, but luckily for Norah a double knock at the door announced Mr. Soane’s return ; and Mrs. Barson hurried down to make tea, bidding Norah follow her at once, and see to it that she heard no more of so frivolous—so wicked a complaint.

CHAPTER VII.

A DARK AFTERNOON.

THE days were drawing in rapidly, and the Christmas recess was very near. The young artists were working hard at their copies of Mount Olivet. It was only a week to the holidays!—only five days—four—three—upon the morrow the final touches must be put.

Those final touches! with what trepidation the girls looked forward to the finishing up of their pictures—to those last delicate strokes that might make or mar the whole! How many wakeful eyes watched through the greater part of the night, how many closed only to dream by turns of triumph or failure! Long before it was time to get up sleep had fled from every one of the young artists, and they lay listening for the first sounds of stirring in the house or road that would warrant them in springing out of bed.

Besides this, Norah had another cause for excitement. Arthur was coming home on the morrow; and though under ordinary circumstances to-day would have seemed so long and wearisome, now it scarcely seemed long enough for all she wanted to do in it. Arthur would come by the five o'clock train; she would meet him at the station; no doubt her aunt would give her

permission to do that. Of course he must have grown during the six months he had been away; she wondered whether she would see much difference in him.

'Poor Artie and I are both so short,' mused she, looking at herself by the faint light of the candle, as she scrambled through her morning toilet. 'I wish I could grow a little faster. Tottie Middleton and Amy Bruce are so tall and graceful. Oh, dear! what a fine thing it is to be pretty! To be sure, I do not have such nice clothes as they do, but then my ugly brown face never would look well in anything. I like Amy the best. I never can quite understand Tottie; she says such disagreeable things sometimes, and seems so reckless and unprincipled. Still, that ought not to make me dislike her. I ought rather to try and make her better, though how to do that I really do not know. She catches one up so sharply, and I am quite sure by the way she answers Lillie that she would not listen to advice from me. Dear, dear, I am forgetting how late it is! A little more haste, if you please, Miss Norah Soane. Plain people cannot make themselves handsome by idling at their glasses.'

A few minutes sufficed to braid her long, glossy black hair, and she was soon ready to go downstairs. Here a surprise was in store for her. The postman had just brought a letter for her papa, stating that in consequence of the sudden illness of one of the principal masters, Arthur's school would break up a day sooner than had previously been arranged, and he would return that afternoon.

Mr. Soane was in such an unusually genial mood,

that Norah proffered her petition on the spur of the moment.

'Papa,' said she, 'may I go to meet Arthur? My studies will be finished by the time his train comes in.'

'Certainly, my dear,' was the gracious reply; and Norah started for school with a heart that bade defiance to all the slights or annoyances that could possibly assail her. Little more than the finishing up of the *replicas* remained to be done. Miss Simpson, who took great interest and pride in the competition, was anxious to afford the girls every facility in her power, and moreover, quite willing for Norah to leave soon enough to catch the four o'clock train, if she could complete her painting by that time.

Norah sat down to her easel with the industry of an enthusiast. Owing to the thought and pains which from the very first she had bestowed on the painting, it only needed a few of those almost imperceptible touches that the true artist can better give than describe, and she lingered lovingly over it. When the schoolroom clock pointed to the hour at which she must start, if she did not wish to miss Arthur, in spite of her impatience to see him she tore herself away with something very like regret.

'Mine really looks very well,' thought she, as she put away her brushes and glided lightly round among her companions, to take a last hurried glance at their pictures.

Who would be the lucky winner of the prize? Certainly not Ellinor Prestwick; hers was far below the average, even to Norah's eye. She

scarcely knew whether she liked Tottie's or Amy's best, and several of the girls had done equally well, she fancied. But she had no time to spare. Hurrying from the studio, she dressed in breathless haste, and took her way to the station.

'I know who means to have the prize,' said Tottie in an undertone to Amy, who sat next her, as the happy girl tripped down the path. 'Did you ever hear of such conceit? Oh, dear me! how *very* sure *we* feel, that *we* can afford to leave *ours* in that offhand way! Well, I declare I think you deserve to lose your chance, Miss Norah Soane.'

'Hers is certainly one of the best, Tot.'

'It looks well enough to us, but we must wait for the critical eye of the judge,' answered Tottie, shrugging her shoulders.

'I am sure Mr. Husken thinks well of it,' persisted Amy.

'What makes you suppose he does?'

'Oh, by the number of faults he picked out in it. He was longer over Norah's than any of the other girls'. He only told most of us what to do next, but he stopped with her to point out no end of little things she had overlooked.'

'Well, I do call that a strange deduction! Really, Amy, you have a most original way of putting things.'

'What is that?' inquired Ellinor Prestwick, who sat on Tottie's right hand.

'Did you ever know such a piece of absurdity? Amy Bruce maintains that Norah's copy is the best, because Mr. Husken found most fault with it last drawing-day.'

Ellinor smiled.

'Perhaps Amy is, after all, not so far wrong. Mr. Husken may see more hope of perfection in hers than in any of ours. She is a clever girl, and very amiable,' added she generously.

By this time the subject was being freely canvassed among the girls, and Miss Simpson, who had just returned to the room after a round of visits to the other classes, called for silence.

The arrival of the singing-master put an end by degrees to the efforts of the young artists. One by one they were called away, or forced to give up work on account of the failing light, until only Tottie and Amy remained. They had begged Miss Simpson to let them stay till the last, though neither of them, especially Tottie, appeared to have much to do; so, after a kind caution not to spoil their pictures by over-touching, Miss Simpson left them while she went to dismiss some of the younger girls.

'Really, I cannot see any more,' exclaimed Tottie irritably, pushing back her easel almost immediately Miss Simpson closed the door, and looking about her with an air of restless weariness. 'I am sure you can't, Amy.'

'No, not much; only I must put two or three strokes in this corner of the foreground. I left some of the bold work till the last, knowing I could manage that better than anything else by dusk.'

'It gets dark so early now,' grumbled Tottie, putting her palette and brushes together and fidgeting over them.

'If I were you, Amy, I wouldn't risk another

touch,' said she, going on a tour of inspection, and making remarks as she went.

'Ellinor Prestwick's is better than I thought,' said she, pausing in front of one of the other easels, and keeping up a running commentary on the various faults of the different artists, interspersed with hints to Amy that she had much better leave off before she did any mischief.

'I must, willy-nilly!' ejaculated she, after some frantic attempts to complete the unfinished corner. 'I can't see the browns from the greens a bit now. There! if mine fails, as it is safe to do, I shall say it was the sun's fault for setting so soon. Where are you, Tottie?'

'Here, studying the relative merits of the whole collection,' answered she, hurrying back to her easel with her brush and palette in her hand.

'Oh, I thought you had put by already, Tot. I shouldn't have left off yet, only I thought you were waiting.'

'Well, I am then, so be quick and let us start. I am tired; I scarcely ever remember being so tired before.'

So saying, she almost flung her colours and brushes into her paint-box, and went out for her hat and jacket, leaving Amy to follow as soon as she could.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BREAK-UP PARTY.

THE eventful day had dawned at last. That evening, at the break-up party, the name of the successful artist would be made known ; but until the evening what a many tedious hours remained—hours in which the anxious young competitors could do nothing but wait and wonder. The morning was sunny, though cold, the frozen snow lay in a thick sheet over the roads and fields, and some of the adventurous spirits were taking advantage of their liberty to enjoy the fresh keen air.

The Prestwicks, who had spent a winter in Canada a year or so before, had set up a sledge ; and Ellinor and her brother Harry were soon flying over the meadows around Prestwick Chase, to the envy of all the young people about, who were fain to content themselves with sliding, or trying to clear the snow off the surface of the village pond, only to find the ice so rough that skating was next door to impracticable. Many of the girls were too much occupied with preparations for the party to have any time to spare for healthful exercise, and spent the day in a ferment of excitement, partly due to their toilettes, partly to the announcement which would form such an important feature of the evening's doings.

Norah, who as yet had only partially laid aside her mourning, had given herself very little trouble about her dress. Mrs. Barson had decided that her black grenadine would do very well, lightened with plenty of cream lace at the neck and arms; and with gracious but characteristic peremptoriness, had decreed that it would be a lovely morning for a walk to the cemetery, which lay about half-way between Westborough and their old home. Thither the brother and sister had betaken themselves, nothing loath to revisit their dear mother's grave; but, with the light-heartedness of youth, enlivening the way in what Mrs. Barson would have considered a very unseemly manner by many a slide as they went along.

Tottie and Lillie Middleton were also among the unlucky minority who were forced to content themselves with done-up dresses. They had only been worn at a last summer's garden party, and were not even soiled, but Tottie fretted and fumed about it till Lillie said at last,—

'What is the matter with you, Tottie? I am sure our dresses will do very nicely. It really does not signify whether people know they are the same.'

'Perhaps not to you, Lil; you never do see things as most other girls do. My head aches fit to split; how I shall get through the evening I can't think.'

'Perhaps it will be better by then,' answered Lillie cheerfully. 'Lie down and have a sleep.'

This was easier said than done; Tottie's thoughts were too busy for her to lie still, much less sleep, and by the afternoon she looked so haggard and worn that her mother began to entertain serious

doubts whether she would be able to go. As the hour for dressing drew near, however, she appeared to revive, and by the time she and Lillie were ready to start her headache had entirely gone. Her face was a trifle flushed, but both girls were very well satisfied with their own appearance, and even Tottie acknowledged that their pale blue satcens were as becoming as anything they could possibly have had.

Many of the pupils and their friends had already assembled when they arrived, and Tottie was not pleased to see Norah sitting by Ellinor Prestwick, just in front of Mrs. Prestwick, Harry, and Arthur Soane.

'How pretty Norah looks to-night!' whispered Amy as Tottie took her place; and in her heart Tottie could not help owning that it was true.

Her black grenadine relieved by cream lace, an amber necklace, and an amber satin sash, suited her admirably, and her dark intelligent eyes sparkled merrily as she talked with Mrs. Prestwick and Ellinor.

Arthur and Harry Prestwick seemed on very good terms too. During the walk to the cemetery that morning it had chanced that as Norah and Arthur were running and sliding along over the beaten snow they heard the jingle of the sleigh-bells, and no sooner had the Prestwicks overtaken them than Ellinor made Harry stop the pony to ask where they were going. Then nothing would do but Norah must try the sledge, the end of the matter being that the four young people took turns in riding and walking, and returned home mutually pleased with each other.

The guests were all assembled at length, and the roll of wheels on the gravel drive announced the benevolent donor of the prize.

Miss Simpson hurried out to receive her, and a flutter of nervous anticipation ran round among those present. There was a moment of breathless silence—a pleasant voice answering Miss Simpson's welcome—then a rustle of silk, and the old lady entered the room leaning on Mr. Husken's arm. Her snowy hair was banded smoothly beneath her white and gold cap, and a fine white woollen wrap hung gracefully over her shoulders and on to her dark, plum-coloured dress. The company rose as she appeared, and having acknowledged their courtesy with a bright smile and a bow, she seated herself in the chair of honour placed for her.

'I am very happy to be with you this evening, Miss Simpson,' said she. 'I think, without in any way breaking confidence or forestalling the pleasant communication which it will presently be your prerogative to make, that I may say in advance that I am highly gratified, not only with the amount of talent the competition has brought out, but also with the interest displayed in it throughout—an interest which I hope has been a pure one, unmarred by the spirit of rivalry, and only stimulated, not actuated by the hope of reward.'

The old lady paused.

'I believe it has been so truly,' answered Miss Simpson. 'The sisterly affection that I am confident exists between all my girls has been a great source of joy to me.'

'Ah! that is right,' said she; 'never forget, my dear children, that love is the foundation on which

the whole building of God rests—the love of the Father, who “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” and the love of the Redeemer, who bade us love one another even as He loved us.’

Having given an epitome of the year’s work, Miss Simpson turned to the question on which so many anxious hopes were centred.

‘It is now my pleasing task,’ said she, ‘to state the result of the competition which has been so special a feature of attraction to us all this term. I may say, that of all the *replicas* of Mount Olivet submitted to the adjudicators, there is not one that does not display talent and do great credit to the artist; and though I am bound in justice to the winner of the prize to say that all are not of equal merit, still there are excellent points in all, and I cannot help feeling that but for the slipshod manner in which some—at least one—of them has been finished, the decision might not have been the same. I must own I regret that such good work has been spoilt by what Mr. Husken and myself are both agreed in regarding as carelessness in the final touches.’

Breathless suspense was visible on every face; some of the girls leant forward, some shrank behind their companions or friends, some coloured, some turned pale, and there was a general flutter even among those only indirectly concerned.

‘Without, therefore, making any further delay,’ continued Miss Simpson, ‘I must inform you that the five-guinea prize presented by our kind patroness has been awarded to——’

A sudden commotion among the girls arrested the conclusion of the sentence. Tottie Middleton had fallen back in her chair. Those near her sprang to their feet, and Mr. Husken and Miss Simpson came forward to see what was the matter.

'Give her air!' cried Miss Simpson, perceiving how the company were crowding round her, and in the midst of the general alarm Mr. Husken carried the fainting girl from the room.

The cool air of the passage soon brought Tottie to, and in a few minutes Miss Simpson was able to leave her with her mother and Lillie, while she returned to the startled guests, to assure them that nothing serious had happened, and to finish her interrupted communication.

To the surprise of all present, not Tottie, but Amy Bruce had won the prize. Norah's picture, though in most respects the best of all, had been spoilt by a few hasty touches—hard lines on the buildings and edges of the middle-distance—which had completely destroyed the soft effect she had been labouring so hard to reproduce. But this blunder was easily accounted for by the girls. They all remembered how excited she had been by Arthur's unexpected return—how she had hurried away to meet him; and one and all agreed that Amy Bruce undoubtedly owed her good fortune to Norah's perturbation on that last afternoon.

'Are you very much disappointed, Norah?' said Arthur, giving her arm a loving squeeze as they went home together.

'Scarcely disappointed, Artie dear, for I did not expect mine would win the prize,' answered Norah,

who had just congratulated Amy very heartily on her success. 'Only I cannot understand how I could have put in those touches. It is the clumsy inartistic work that annoys me more than the loss of the prize. To think that every one should see I have failed through such manifest stupidity.'

'No one will set it down to that, Norrie; they all know it was because of the failing light.'

'But the light was not failing, Artie; that is, not much when I finished mine; I left early to meet you.'

'Yes, of course. You were on the platform when the train came in. You can't imagine how delighted I was to see your dear old face.'

'Can't I?'

'Well, perhaps you can, though you hadn't been away all these months; you hadn't been among a chippy set of money-making strangers, without papa or even Aunt Barson to look kindly at you sometimes.'

Norah raised her eyebrows and tried to catch the expression of his face by the bright starlight, to see if he were truly in earnest.

'Poor Artie!' said she, remembering how unusually good Mrs. Barson had been the last few days; 'I suppose home is the best, after all.'

'Yes; but, Norrie, if you did not put those daubs on your picture, who do you suppose did?'

'Oh, Artie! what do you mean? Who would put them? Who would be so wicked?'

'That is just what I want to know, Norrie. If you are quite sure that you did not, somebody else must have.'

Norah said nothing. The idea that one of the

girls could have been guilty of so unworthy an action had never occurred to her till Arthur suggested it, and the thought pained her acutely.

'I know two or three boys who wouldn't be above such a trick, and I daresay some girls are not much better,' said he, finding she was still silent. 'Are you quite sure you did not make them yourself?'

'Quite sure; that is I think I am. Had it been ever so dark I should not have put in anything so coarse, so hard; and it was quite light when I started.'

'Why don't you tell Miss Simpson?'

'Oh, Arthur! I couldn't do that. Only consider what a dreadful accusation it would be to bring against the girls. She would think I was jealous of Amy's success. No, no, I am certain none of them would do such a thing.'

CHAPTER IX.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

CHRISTMAS week passed gaily for the young people at Westborough. There were the usual happy gatherings of old and young, who had assembled from far and near, around festive boards groaning with good cheer. Westborough was not overburdened with poor; and since such as there were had received liberal donations of beef and other good things from their wealthy neighbours, the Christmas greetings exchanged by one and all—from Squire Prestwick down to the lowliest in the parish—had been no shallow form of words, but the genuine expression of ‘peace on earth and goodwill to men.’

The swiftly fleeting moments are speeding on, the old year has nearly told his tale, the sun is sinking for the last time in the cycle that will complete his annual course. Hark! through the rosy evening mist comes the faint sound of the abbey bells across the marshes, sweet as the memory of the sunshine and beauty of the past seasons—the smiles, kind words and deeds that make life worth the living, and what God meant it to be. Happy they who can listen to those bells with no regret for the echoes awakened by their chiming, who can hear the old year breathe out his

record of the bygone days unsaddened by the recollections they evoke!

There has been no lack of fun and merriment during the week at the Chase. Sleighing and skating in abundance; for, in spite of the deep snow, Mr. Prestwick has had the great lake swept, and the young people have been disporting themselves in the wintry air till their appetites are keen enough to make the coarsest fare palatable. But to-day, besides being New Year's Eve, is Ellinor's birthday, and all her schoolfellows have been invited to spend it with her. So no sooner does the daylight fade than the heroine of the day commands a retreat, and forthwith there is a sudden skimming to the bank—a general unstrapping of skates—and then a rush to the house to dress for the high tea which is the necessary wind up to several hours' exercise on the ice. All the girls' evening dresses have been sent up to the Chase, and a merry hubbub is going on in the two or three large rooms that have been devoted to their accommodation. All manner of topics have their turn, and the lucky winner of ~~the prize is not~~ forgotten.

'I never was ~~more surprised~~ in my life,' said Ellinor ~~Prestwick~~ to Tottie, 'to hear that Amy Bruce had won.'

Tottie looked round uncomfortably.

'Amy is in the blue room, so we can talk without making her blush,' said Ellinor.

'I am very glad Amy had it,' remarked Norah, quietly.

'Seriously, Norah?' said Ellinor, pulling a comical long face.

'Yes, heartily glad. Amy is a nice girl, and I am really pleased she won it.'

'How disinterested!' laughed several.

'Are we not all nice girls?' inquired Ellinor with a playful pretence of *pique*.

'No doubt,' answered Norah smiling, then adding archly, 'present company always excepted, you know.'

'Really, Norah, you hardly deserve to hear what I was going to say.'

'Oh, do tell, do tell!' cried the girls, pressing round her.

'Stand back, stand back!' said Ellinor, waving them off with both hands. 'Such delicate confidences ought not to be made before a crowd. Still, as we are all friends, I may as well say plainly that I fully expected Norah would have the prize.'

'So did I, so did I,' repeated most of the girls.

'I believe we all thought so,' continued Ellinor; 'didn't you, Tottie?'

'I—don't—that is—I don't think any one could tell,' faltered Tottie.

'Well, yours was decidedly the best before that last afternoon we had at them, Norah. What a pity it was you spoilt it! Amy's was not to be compared to yours. I am positive Miss Simpson thought so. Are you not well, dear?' said she, turning to Tottie, who had turned pale, and now sat down suddenly.

'I am a little over-tired, I believe,' gasped she; 'I shall be better directly.'

'You are faint, I daresay, dear; and here am I, like a careless rattle-brain, forgetting that we are

all as hungry as hunters. Wait a moment, my smelling-salts are on the dressing-table ; here they are. Now I will ring for Sarah to bring you a cup of tea. Would any one else like one ?'

Several accepted the offer gratefully, and after a little while they descended to the dining-room, where Mr. and Mrs. Prestwick and the gentlemen of the party were awaiting them.

Tottie was still pale, but declared she had quite recovered herself, with the exception of a trifling headache, not worth mentioning.

The brothers of all Ellinor's schoolfellows had been invited, together with a number of other young people ; and after tea music and games whiled away the time till supper.

Mr. Prestwick, who as a rule had a dislike to late hours, always made a point of seeing the New Year in, and never failed to attend the watch-night service at the church he attended. Some of his holiest associations were connected with that service, he said ; and he should be very glad if as many of his young friends as had permission from their parents to stay so late would accompany him. He himself would undertake that they should be safely escorted home.

Most of those present embraced the opportunity. Mr. Soane and Mrs. Barson had already expressed their intention of being at the church, so Arthur and Norah, to their great delight, were able to go. Tottie, however, who looked very uncomfortable when the subject was mentioned, begged to be allowed to return home. 'She was tired,' she said, and her mamma would not like to be kept up.

Long after the joyful peal from the old belfry had ushered in the New Year did she toss wearily on her pillow, seeking in vain for rest for her throbbing head ; hour after hour struck, and still sleep fled from her eyelids. 'There is no peace, saith my God, for the wicked.'

That same night, as Arthur Soane and Harry Prestwick were walking home together from the church, the latter recurred quite by chance to the recent drawing competition. Though his junior by several years, there was something so intelligent and companionable about Arthur, so unlike the incipient sporting tendencies of many of his acquaintances, that Harry Prestwick had taken a great fancy to him.

'I am sorry your sister did not win that prize,' said he suddenly, when the morning's skating had been thoroughly discussed.

'She ought to have had it,' was the blunt answer.

'Well, I think so. Amy Bruce's was not to be compared to hers, even allowing for that unfortunate blemish. It seems hardly fair to let a few careless strokes turn the scale.'

'I wonder how Mr. Husken can believe she did them,' said Arthur, unable to keep back what was on his mind.

'What! do you mean to say there was any unfair play?'

This was a startling question, but Arthur was too warm on the subject to be able to stop himself now.

'If it were anybody else but my own sister, I should say so decidedly.'

'But who among these girls would do such a thing, Arthur?'

'I don't know; I don't like to suppose that any of them would. It is a nasty trick to bring against a girl, but I know one or two boys who wouldn't stick for a moment if they had the chance.'

'Do you think, then, that Amy Bruce did it out of spite?'

'No, not spite, only to make sure of getting it herself.'

Both were silent for a few minutes, and the merry voices of their companions could be heard laughing gaily and calling to one another as they slipped and stumbled over the rough frozen snow.

'Does your sister believe that Amy Bruce touched her painting?' asked Harry Prestwick at last.

'No, not exactly—she won't think about it; but she is certain she did not put those strokes herself.'

'What unsociable fellows you are!' cried Frank Bruce, coming up just then with a girl on each arm. 'Mr. Prestwick is crying shame on you for leaving the young ladies to keep their own balance in this bearish fashion.'

'Polar bears,' suggested one of the girls.

'How very remiss!' said Harry Prestwick; 'we apologise.'

'Bearishly?' asked Frank.

'No, sir, humbly. We were under the impression that ladies now-a-days went in for women's rights.'

'So they do; and those are, to be waited on and protected by the gentlemen.'

'Come, Arthur, we have certainly laid ourselves

open to an imputation of want of chivalry ; let us go and help the ladies along these rough roads. It is not often we shall have the privilege of such a starlight ramble.'

They were soon back amongst the gay party who were making their way over the snow as best they could. Some of them, unused to walking in the dark and afraid of falling, were, as Frank had inferred, in no little difficulty, and were glad of assistance. Mr. Prestwick was already the centre of five or six, who, arm in arm, were coming along with tolerable ease, but the help of the two boys was gratefully accepted by some of the others.

Then they must needs all stop on the brow of the hill to look at the starry heavens and listen to the bells once more, before they entered the sombre plantation of firs and bare gaunt-limbed oaks and ashes that lay between them and their several homes.

'What a dark, weird place this is!' said Norah to Harry Prestwick, who was now making amends for his former neglect, and kept enlivening the way by a succession of creepy anecdotes. 'I should not care to walk through here alone at night.'

'The spot certainly suggests horrors,' answered he. 'Shall I tell you what happened to me one winter evening when I was going through much such a gloomy grove as this, where we lived before we came to the Chase, or will it make you too nervous?'

'We should enjoy it immensely,' exclaimed both girls; 'the darkness and the hour will add to the effect.'

'I was returning from school one dark afternoon,

or evening, I should say, for I had stayed behind to arrange with some of the boys for a torchlight skating-match that we had decided on holding unknown to our Principal—"Old Timorous" we always nicknamed him. Whether my uneasy conscience had made a coward of me, or whether the wind was unusually biting, I will not attempt to decide; but I distinctly remember shuddering as I dived under the trees and heard it whistling and blustering overhead.'

'A foreboding,' suggested Norah.

'I believe I must have felt it so, though I was by no means superstitious. Anyway I stopped—afraid for the first time in my life—and half-turned to go back; then suddenly remembering what a cowardly thing it was to be alarmed at a few tree trunks and the screaming blast, like a girl—I beg your pardon, young ladies!—I burst into a loud laugh and ran on. But now comes the harrowing part of my story. Scarcely had my voice rung out in the lonely wood when it was answered by a moan—a hollow, sepulchral, awful moan, that curdled my blood and made my hair almost stand on end.'

'Oh!' exclaimed both girls in a breath.

'That was exactly what I should have said if I had not been too scared to utter a sound. It was dangerously near too, and I stood rooted to the spot. As I listened, quaking in every limb, expecting every minute to see some dreadful shape appear before me—I can't conscientiously say what I did expect—I heard it again, more unearthly, more eerie, if possible, than before; and at the same instant a dim reddish light danced unsteadily

among the trees—now here, now there—sometimes disappearing altogether, and then growing brighter than ever in the darkness.’

‘How horrible!’ ejaculated Amy.

‘Was it a “will o’ the wisp”?’ asked Norah.

‘I am ashamed to say the idea of anything so rational never occurred to me. My long legs had carried me a good stretch from the road before that awful groan fell on my ears, but now I dared not stir—I dared not stay.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Norah.

‘What I should have done I cannot tell; but just as I came so near the verge of despair that I must have tumbled over the edge of it some way or other, a voice cried, “Hullo! puir beastie! Winter winna last ower mony a day. Tim’s a comin’, and grannie ’ll hac a bit o’ sup for us baith when we win hame.”’

Norah laughed.

‘Grannie and supper!’ exclaimed she; ‘there was nothing very goblin-like in that.’

‘No; pray take the moral to heart; causes are generally more simple than their effects; and never let your eyes and ears get the upper hand of your reason.’

‘An excellent maxim,’ remarked Amy.

‘Like most good advice, easier to give than take.’

‘Yes,’ said Norah; ‘but now for the sequel, please. You forget we are still enveloped in mystery.’

‘True! I had overlooked that. Tim was a poor daft Scotch lad—well known to everybody about—who used to go errands for people in the village.

The old grandmother with whom he lived had sent him for her week's grocery. Now Tim, having obtained another commission on the road, not minded to carry the double burden all the way, had left his dog tied up to a tree, in charge of grannie's basket.'

'Then it was the howls of the poor animal that so terrified you?' said Amy.

'Yes ; my unseemly laughter no doubt jarred on his susceptible nature.'

By this time nearly all the party had been dropped at their respective homes, and Harry Prestwick was resigning Norah to the care of Mr. Soane and Mrs. Barson, who had just overtaken them, when a carriage drove out of Mr. Middleton's gate.

'They have been keeping it up late to-night,' remarked Mrs. Barson.

'I am afraid some one must be ill,' answered Harry ; 'that was Doctor Jackson, I saw his face quite plainly as he passed the lodge. Good night.'

CHAPTER X.

MRS. BARSON'S TEMPER DOES NOT IMPROVE.

MRS. BARSON had been so unaccountably amiable all these holidays that Norah began to hope her heart was really softening, and that the harshness with which she had hitherto treated them was a thing of the past.

But, alas! no sooner had the New Year fairly started on its course, than a vision of school seemed to dawn upon her, and her former sternness returned. She kept Norah so hard at sewing that it was seldom she could find time for innocent recreation; while as for Arthur, if he stayed at home, his presence was a crime; if he went out, there was sure to be trouble in store for him when he came back. Either he was late, or he failed to wipe his shoes thoroughly, or he took the dog out and let him run after the neighbours' cows or their geese, or sent him into the river, and then—as had unfortunately happened on a previous occasion—had not been able to prevent him bolting off home through the front hall into the drawing-room. This juvenile delinquency, which Arthur was careful not to repeat, was the fruitful subject of many a lecture, many a stern reprimand from his father, who took for granted all Mrs. Barson said, and would listen neither to reason nor excuse.

Dearly as Norah loved to have Arthur at home, this perpetual fault-finding made her almost long for the holidays to be at an end. Not a day passed without some new difficulty. She was rarely allowed even to go for a walk with him, lest he should lead her into mischief, and the dread that he might grow impatient and be led into rudeness or defiance made her very miserable.

'Where have you been all the week?' asked Amy one afternoon, finding her at work hemming a pile of dusters.

'At home, dear.'

'At home!' repeated Amy; 'do you mean to say you have not been out at all?'

'Not literally. I have been into the village several times with Aunt Barson.'

Amy shrugged her shoulders.

'But haven't you been out to tea anywhere?'

'No, dear; have you?'

'Yes; three evenings out of six, and the alternate days we have had friends at home. We had some delightful part-singing the other evening at Mrs. Prestwick's.'

Norah sighed.

'Have you called on Ellinor since New Year's Eve?'

'No, I have not been able.'

'Dear Norah, that is very remiss.'

'Aunt Barson has given me such a heap of work that she says must be finished during the holidays,' answered Norah patiently.

'The Prestwicks will not think that an excuse for such an omission. It is too bad of your aunt to waste all your holidays so. Of course we ought

to do our share of the home work ; but it is not fair to make you lose all the fun. Have you heard how Tottie is ?'

'Not to-day.'

'Her cold seems better, but Dr. Jackson says she is in a low feverish state. I suppose she took a chill on the ice at the Chase.'

'Poor Tottie! I am so sorry for her. I believe losing the prize was a great mortification to her.'

'Yes, no doubt ; still, nobody can help that. She had to take her chance like the rest of us. I am sure I never expected to win it.'

'Were you very much surprised ?'

'Perfectly astounded ; shouldn't you have been ?'

'I suppose I should,' said Norah, drawing a long breath. 'I didn't have a chance of trying how that felt.'

'Cannot you be spared this evening, Norah? Come and spend it with us.'

'I should very much like to, if aunt will give me leave.'

But Mrs. Barson was in one of her evil moods. Poor Norah only met with a snarly refusal, and a lecture on the frivolity of the young folks of the present day into the bargain.

Norah's disappointment had been greater than she cared to own, even to herself. Not that she had ever exactly counted on winning the prize ; but she had entered into the competition with great ardour, and now it was at an end all the interest seemed gone out of her life.

Of all her studies, painting was that in which

she most delighted. Her copy was unquestionably second to none ; she could not but feel that Mr. Husken himself thought so until it was spoilt by those wretched daubs. She was positive she had not put them in ; but then who had ? Who could have been guilty of such a mean, such an unworthy action ?

It was not even the loss of the prize, so much as the slur upon her artistic powers, that galled her so bitterly.

Miss Simpson had spoken a few well-meant words to her during the course of the evening, recommending her to be more careful in the future ; several of her schoolfellows had expressed great surprise at the adjudication, and had condoled with her very heartily, though all were unanimous in their congratulations to Amy Bruce, whose painting was certainly the next in order of merit. One and all evidently considered the loss of the prize the main subject for regret.

Mr. Husken alone seemed capable of entering into her feelings.

‘I have never seen you put in such work as that before,’ had been his brief comment, with what sounded very like displeasure ; and severe as his tone was, his blame was more in accord with her own sentiments than the consolatory remarks that poured in from all sides.

Perhaps the worst trial of all she was called on to bear was the never-ending torrent of questions and comments she had to endure from Mrs. Barson.

Mr. Soane, after expressing a mild paternal regret that she had missed, when by all accounts

she was so near winning the prize, subsided into his arm-chair, and burying himself in the paper, banished the matter without a second thought; but Mrs. Barson was perpetually bringing it up, torturing Norah by her lectures on self-conceit, driving her almost to despair with tirades against untidy, slovenly work of every description.

'I verily believe patience is the most praiseworthy of all good graces!' exclaimed Norah, one afternoon, as she went out of the gate on an errand for her aunt. She had been sitting all the morning hard at work at some plain sewing, during which Mrs. Barson had improved 'the shining hour' by a succession of reprimands and ill-natured hints that had made Norah's task anything but cheerful.

'The most Christian too, very often,' said Ellinor Prestwick, who was just coming up to the gate, and caught what she said.

Norah started. The words had been wrung from her as a protest against the incessant nagging she had endured; she had not intended them to be overheard.

'Were you coming to call?' she asked.

'Yes; I thought perhaps you might like to have a walk. Can you come with me? The air is so lovely.'

'I should like to above all things,' answered Norah.

'Let us set off at once then. I am glad I came up before you started. We will go through the wood, and come back across the fields; that will make a nice round.'

Norah looked longingly towards the bridle-path,

that lay half-embowered in nut bushes and maples, whose swelling buds looked crimson in the January sun.

'I am afraid I can't to-day,' said she. 'Aunt has sent me to order some honey for her.'

'A sweet order,' laughed Ellinor.

Norah smiled; she did not say she thought it would be thrown away so far as Mrs. Barson was concerned.

'I don't see why that need stop us,' said Ellinor. 'Where shall you get it?'

'From old Mrs. Ball at the farm; she has ten hives.'

'We can easily take the farm on our way back then. It will be a trifle out of our road, but we have plenty of time.'

This was an irresistible argument, and they plunged into the green depths of the bridle-path.

Norah was not addicted to grumbling, neither was she in the habit of reposing imprudent confidences in her acquaintances; but before long a chance word drew her out, and she found herself almost involuntarily pouring the story of the morning's troubles into Ellinor's sympathetic ear.

'Ah, that was what you meant about patience, just as I came up to the gate.'

Norah could not help laughing, as she remembered how she had given vent to her feelings.

'It is very hard to be patient sometimes,' she said. 'Aunt is never satisfied, do what I will. However much I seek to please her, it makes no difference; if I go to work fast, she says I am

hurrying; if I take extra pains, she grumbles at me for being slow. Really it seems lost labour to try.'

'I suppose we nineteenth-century Christians have chiefly small evils to fight with,' said Ellinor thoughtfully. 'After all, I think they are the most difficult to overcome. It would certainly be easier to shut out a lion than a swarm of mosquitoes.'

'But if the lion did force his way in, I know which I would rather have to face,' said Norah. 'Mosquito bites are very irritating, but you can bear them.'

'That is true,' said Ellinor. 'The most exasperating of every-day worries generally come singly, or at least only two or three at a time. Still, I don't know if a swarm of mosquitoes would not be as bad as a lion.'

'I almost think it would,' returned Norah reflectively, and they walked on some distance, each wrapped in her own thoughts.

'Ellinor,' said she at length, 'do you believe all these bothers and vexations make us better or worse?'

Ellinor considered a moment.

'I don't know,' said she. 'They ought to make us better, if we meet them in the right spirit; but that is the question—do we?'

The afternoon sun was already edging the clouds with a faint tinge of gold, and the river winding along at the foot of the copse sparkled in the light.

'Look, look!' exclaimed Norah, as they came to an opening in the trees. It was like a peep

into an enchanted land; the meadows along the farther bank of the river were emerald with freshness, the brown hedges and bushes were fringed with a haze of red and gold, the leafless elms glowed with burnished copper from the declining sun, as he lay enthroned in a glorious archway of cloudlets.

Norah was the first to speak.

'I can understand it now,' said she.

'What can you understand?' asked Ellinor, with her eyes riveted on the beautiful scene.

'What you were saying about meeting our daily crosses in a right spirit. All those bright glittering cloud-flecks that look so lovely now, seen through the darkness of a gathering storm, would only add to the greyiness and gloom. Regarded with a discontented, murmuring mind, they are, in plain point of fact, nothing but very disagreeable, ordinary little masses of vapour, analogous to the frets and worries that gather round us from day to day.'

'A very pretty poetical simile, that doesn't carry such a sting with it as the mosquito one does. So much for the beauty of truth,' answered Ellinor.

Nora laughed quite merrily.

'Speaking from experience, I should say the mosquito one would fit Aunt Barson the best; I can hardly bring myself to invest her lectures with a golden halo. There, Ellinor, I'm not grumbling at all now. I really believe that sunset has taught me a lesson. A prayerful, patient spirit is like yonder glorious radiance. By God's grace I will try to gild the clouds that ride round me. But we must not linger here too long.'

‘No, or we shall have the mosquitoes buzzing about our ears by-and-by,’ answered Ellinor. And there was a spice of mischief in her eyes as she added, ‘We must not forget the honey for your aunt as we go home.’

CHAPTER XI.

HARRY PRESTWICK CONFIDES HIS SUSPICIONS.

ARTHUR SOANE's suspicions that Norah had missed the prize through unfair play had not been lost on Harry Prestwick. At first he was inclined to fancy there was no foundation for it, and that in boyish admiration for his sister Arthur had so magnified her talent that he found it impossible to believe any one could surpass her; that it was absurd to suppose Amy Bruce would be guilty of such an unworthy act. But the more he reflected over the idea the more it began to take hold of his mind.

'Do you know, Ellinor,' said he, 'Arthur Soane thinks all was not clear and above board in that competition?'

'That is like a boy to say so, just because Norah did not win the prize; but whom does he blame?—the adjudicators?'

'No, one of the girls.'

'I think it is a very mean thing to say. I wonder he is not ashamed to put such a slander about.'

'He has not put it about. It came out in confidence to me, almost unwillingly.'

'But, Harry, consider what a dreadful accusation to make. Which of the girls has he singled out for the black honour?'

'No one in particular. It seems to fit Amy Bruce better than any one else.'

'Don't talk so absurdly, Harry! I can't believe it of Amy. There! I would hardly believe it of *her* if she owned to it herself.'

In spite, however, of this vehement assurance of Amy's innocence, that same afternoon Ellinor told her mother what Harry had said, repeating her conviction that there could not be any truth in it, and expressing great indignation against Arthur Soane for setting such a libel afloat.

'I have always heard him described as a very unruly boy,' said she.

To her surprise Mrs. Prestwick manifested no such certainty.

'Take care, my dear,' answered she mildly, 'that you are not doing the same with regard to Arthur Soane. You have heard him ill spoken of; but how do you know he deserves all the evil that is said of him? Mrs. Barson, from whom these tales chiefly originate, does not appear to me a person likely to regard the foolish scrapes of a schoolboy with much indulgence.'

'Still, mamma, this is such a dreadful thing to say, just because Norah lost the prize.'

'There is all the more reason for supposing that he has some warrant for the accusation. I must say, my own impression on looking at the picture was, that no one who paints as well as Norah does would have put in those touches. I am glad Arthur Soane has started the doubt, and I shall——'

'Oh, mamma! you surely are not going to——'

'I shall speak to Miss Simpson about it.'

'Mamma, dear !' exclaimed Ellinor in a tone of entreaty, 'don't do that. Only think how it will be talked about all over the place. Amy will hear that it has come through me.'

'It will not be talked about,' replied her mother. 'If Arthur Soane is really the boy your scandal-loving friends have represented him, nothing will prevent him from spreading any number of fabrications ; therefore on that account alone it is fair to Amy Bruce that Miss Simpson should have an opportunity of contradicting them. If, on the contrary, there has been any cheating in the matter, it is neither just to Norah nor good for the guilty person that the affair should be hushed up.'

The following morning Mrs. Prestwick acquainted Miss Simpson with her suspicions and the facts upon which they were grounded. Miss Simpson was very much pained. In spite of her unwillingness to believe Amy capable of such despicable conduct, she could not help acknowledging that appearances were greatly against her.

'I certainly cannot conceive how Norah could have done anything so crude and inartistic,' said she ; 'especially since it was quite light when she left. Not many minutes previously, too, I had looked at her painting as I went out of the room. I am positive I should have noticed anything so palpably coarse at once. I am determined, Mrs. Prestwick, that the mystery shall be thoroughly cleared up ; there may be some difficulty about it, but you may rest assured that sooner or later we will come at the truth.'

Meanwhile the trials and hardships by which Norah's home life was beset were increasing every

day. Mrs. Barson was stricter and crosser than ever, Mr. Soane more wrapped up in himself. However unjust her aunt might be, appeal to her father was useless, for he was too selfish to trouble himself. This state of things was bad enough for Arthur, who generally managed to escape for strolls and expeditions of various kinds with lads of his own age, during at least a part of the day; but it fell very heavily indeed on Norah, who had to bear the brunt not only of her own unintentional offences, but of Arthur's more wilful ones. Mrs. Barson's system of arbitrary repression and tyranny was exercising a very deleterious influence over Arthur. When he dared, he openly defied her; and when restrained by fear of his father, resorted to artifice and subterfuge.

'I tell you I don't care, Norrie,' said he one morning; 'let her storm if she pleases. I am not going to give up my day's fun for fear of her tongue. *Father didn't say I was not to go.*'

'Yes he did, Arthur; you know he did.'

'Well, I didn't hear him,' retorted he; 'and as for taking Aunt Barson's word for it, I have heard her swear black was white so often, that I'm not going to put faith in what she says when it stands in the way of such a glorious chance.'

The fact was, Arthur had bounced out of the room before Mr. Soane had finished speaking, with the deliberate intention of availing himself of this excuse.

'It's hard if I can't enjoy myself a bit in my holidays. Prestwick and Bruce and all the best fellows in the place will be there. It isn't as if we were off on anything fishy.'

'But it is disobedience all the same, Artie; father said you were——'

'Shut up, will you! All I heard him say was that such expeditions were dangerous. Now what danger can there be in this hockey match? The fens have been frozen stiff these three weeks and more. I shall go, and chance getting into a row when I come back.'

'For my sake, Arthur,' pleaded Norah; 'you don't know how bad it is for me when you are in trouble.'

'I daresay it is, Norrie; I can't imagine how you endure being in day after day with that precious old growler at your heels. I suppose girls have to get used to these things. But you don't know what it is to be away for six months in that wretched cheap hole, on short rations of salt junk and fat pork, and bread and scrape such as you never saw—two hunches apiece—sawn off loaves as dry as dog biscuit.'

'Oh, Arthur!' cried Norah, her eyes filling with tears; 'it isn't so bad as that.'

'Isn't it? You just try, that's all.'

'Well but, Arthur, supposing some harm should come of your breaking——'

'Look here, Norrie,' interrupted he; 'your conscience is a good deal too thin-skinned for a boy. I've got mine rigged up with a stouter sort, a good calf-skin, that's warranted to bear the strain. I mean to go, in spite of Madam Straitlace, so there's an end of it.'

Finding expostulations useless, Norah said no more. But presently, thinking he would be hungry before the day was at an end, and knowing that

he had no pocket money left, she waited till her aunt was out of the room and slipped her last remaining threepence into his hand.

‘It is all I have,’ whispered she.

‘You’re a brick!’ said he, kissing her. ‘Don’t you be afraid, you kind little goose; I shall be all right.’

A little later Arthur was nowhere to be found.

‘If that boy has acted in direct disobedience to his father, he shall hear of it when he comes back!’ exclaimed Mrs. Barson, returning to her comfortable arm-chair by the fire, and scanning Norah narrowly through her gold-rimmed spectacles. ‘Did you know he was going?’

‘He said he could not see any reason why he should not,’ answered Norah truthfully.

‘So you have been aiding and abetting him in his evil ways, miss,’ began her aunt; but luckily for Norah a visitor called, and the cross-examination was postponed for a while.

CHAPTER XII.

INDIGNATION OR SPITE?

IT has been well said that there is wisdom in silence. Carefully as Miss Simpson had impressed the duty of secrecy on those to whom she spoke, it was impossible for her to unravel the mystery without taking more persons into her confidence than knew how to keep a quiet tongue. Before she had made the round of the first-class girls the story had been whispered half over Westborough, from one pair of inseparables to another; and no little indignation had been aroused. Ellinor Prestwick was the only one who had not passed the information on, the subject being so painful that she shrank from introducing it.

‘Have you heard what that mean-spirited Arthur Soane has been spreading about?’ said one of the girls who was sitting with Tottie one morning when Ellinor called.

Tottie was convalescent now, and her young friends vied with each other in beguiling her loneliness.

‘What is that?’ inquired Ellinor prudently.

‘Hasn’t Miss Simpson told you? Why, it appears he has set it about that Amy Bruce cheated his sister out of the prize; that she knew Norah’s picture was the best, and tampered with it to prevent her winning.’

'I don't believe she could have done it,' said Lillie, looking up from a cushion she was beading. 'One of you would have been sure to have seen her.'

'No, we shouldn't; it turns out that Amy was the last in the room,' said the busybody confidentially; 'but you must on no account say I told you; this is strictly between ourselves. I wouldn't have mentioned it to any one else. Isn't it a shame, just because his sister didn't get it?'

'I am sure Norah doesn't mind,' remarked Lillie gently. 'I haven't heard her say an envious word, and she congratulated Amy very sincerely.'

'Of course, that is the very thing she would do,' answered the other girl. 'My prejudices never have deceived me yet, and I took a dislike to her from the first. Swarthy people always have a malicious, designing look to me.'

'Oh, you ought not to say that, Miss Forbes,' interrupted Lillie. 'Christians ought not to have prejudices; and though Norah is sallow, no one could call her swarthy.'

Miss Forbes eyed Lillie with quizzical amusement.

'That's right! little Miss Innocence. Wrap yourself up in that nice warm cloak; but don't think your blind charity will screen you from judgment when your turn comes.'

'I believe there is a popular superstition that red-haired people are deceitful,' said Ellinor quietly.

It was not her habit to make ill-natured speeches, and she was well aware that Miss Forbes' hair was not far from what is vulgarly termed carrotty; but

the girl's manifest spite against Norah stung her into the unkind retort.

'I thought,' pursued Ellinor, 'that such last-century notions had died out with the belief that the possession of a black cat stamped its owner as a witch.'

'Well, suppose we leave Norah Soane's peculiar style of beauty alone, since it seems a sore point,' answered Miss Forbes, emphasizing *peculiar*, and beating a dignified retreat with a grim smile of defiance. 'What is your opinion, Miss Prestwick? Do you believe Amy Bruce would do such a horribly mean thing?'

'It would give me great pain to think so. I hope Miss Simpson will find out the truth.'

'Yes, so do I. It will be awfully unpleasant to go back with that suspicion hanging over us all. What do you think, Tottie?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' answered she abruptly. 'My illness has put everything out of my head.'

'Only fancy if Amy had been caught in the act,' persisted Miss Forbes, unwilling to drop the subject.

'I would much rather believe that Norah did it herself in her hurry to meet her brother,' said Ellinor.

'So would I,' echoed Lillie. 'There is no sin either in a mistake or in stupidity.'

'What a sage remark!' jeeringly observed Miss Forbes.

'Only, you see, Norah is positive she did not put those touches in herself; and really I do not see how she could have,' pursued Ellinor.

'Oh, I can understand that well enough, Miss

Prestwick; we are all liable to careless fits. I should be the first to stand up for the girl, if she owned to it honestly; but deliberately to throw the blame on Amy because she happened to be left alone in the room! and of course we can easily guess who set Arthur Soane on.'

'But supposing Norah really did not——' began Lillie.

'Do leave off jangling,' interrupted Tottie, petulantly, throwing herself back in her chair. 'My head aches fit to split.'

'Poor Tottie!' cried Lillie, putting down her work and coming to her. 'Let me bathe it for you.'

'No, no, leave me alone. I shall be all right if you will only let me be quiet; but you do talk so loud, all of you.'

Tottie's headache effectually put a stop to the argument; and shortly afterwards Ellinor and Miss Forbes left. Scarcely had the door closed on Lillie, who accompanied them out of the room, when Tottie began to rock herself backwards and forwards violently; then burying her face in her handkerchief, burst into tears.

'How shall I bear it?' sobbed she. 'School begins next Tuesday; how shall I face the girls? How shall I face Miss Simpson? If I could only get away from the thought; but to feel that I shall have it always with me—not for a day nor a week, but all my life. How shall I bear it?—all my life! Oh, if I had known! but it is too late now—too late!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END OF THE HOCKEY MATCH.

ARTHUR SOANE had lost no time in joining Harry Prestwick and a select hockey party at the Chase. The morning was bright and clear, with hoar frost sparkling on the branches of the over-arching trees when they started for the fens, and everything promised a splendid day. With a boy's carelessness, Arthur had never given a thought as to how he should manage for refreshment. Norah's sisterly gift, little as it was, had just suggested the possibility of hunger before he reached home; but threepence would buy bread and cheese, he thought, ample to satisfy his appetite, and he had dismissed the subject with a pleasant feeling of independence.

They had some miles to walk, but that was only a part of the enjoyment, and they talked and laughed, sang, whistled and shouted as they went along, swinging their skates, and varying the way by innumerable digressions to every pond or ditch within sight, and extemporizing a sort of steeple-chase over all the gates they had the smallest excuse for vaulting. By the time they had nearly reached their destination, the keen air began to have an effect on most of them, and a few random remarks on their readiness for a feed made Arthur wish his pockets were better filled. Very soon he

was startled to hear that they proposed having a luncheon-dinner at the Coach and Horses before going on the ice.

'Dinner!' exclaimed he to Frank Bruce, who happened to be near. 'I never thought of dinner.'

'Some people are stingy enough to sponge on others to any amount,' answered Frank rudely, turning his shoulder on him as he spoke.

Arthur, quite ignorant of the special reason for spleen that Frank had against him, attributed this ill-mannered behaviour to his own lack of money, and grew more uncomfortable the nearer they approached the halting-place. He was convinced that if they were all going in for a dinner at the Coach and Horses, it would never do for him to content himself with three pennyworth of bread and cheese. There was no help for it, he must borrow of somebody; but he was determined not to be beholden to Frank Bruce, and remembering how sociable and kind he had invariably found Harry Prestwick, he resolved on representing the matter to him.

'I've got myself into a pretty corner,' said he, dashing into the difficulty with blunt straightforwardness.

'What is that?'

'I have come away with only threepence in my pocket.'

'Don't trouble yourself about that, Arthur; I'll pay your score. You won't be good for much if you don't start with a hearty meal.'

The fading light had put an end to the hockey at length, and the scattered players were flying swiftly over the immense stretch of ice, enjoying a

last exhilarating rush through the air before they turned homeward, when Arthur, who was somewhat in advance of his companions, suddenly found himself alone, and not wishing to be left behind, wheeled round to rejoin them. A thin white mist was gathering, preventing him from seeing far ahead. Before he had taken many strokes he heard the sound of skates, and in another moment Frank Bruce appeared before him.

'Hie! you Soane, is that you?' shouted he.

'Yes; are the others off?'

'I've a few words to say to you before we go home to-night; so if you've anything of the man in you, we'll just have it out here and now,' answered Frank savagely.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I've left the others more than a mile behind, so you needn't think to get away. I'll teach you to spread evil tales about my sister all over the place; you wretched, cowardly rascal to think such a thing of a girl! Girls are truer, more honourable, better every way than we are. *My* sister would scorn such unworthiness, and all I can say is, if *that* is your opinion of girls, it shows what a sample you must have had in your own sister.'

Arthur had tried once or twice to put in a word of explanation, but Frank gave him no time; before his angry fulmination was half exhausted he began to supplement words by blows.

Arthur was no coward. Frank's contemptuous allusion to Norah had already stung him to the quick, his spirit was roused, and he returned blow for blow with interest. Fortunately, however, Frank's idea of the distance they were from the

rest of the party was exaggerated. They had grappled and fallen, and were struggling together on the ice, hitting fiercely at each other as they lay, when Harry Prestwick and some of the others came up.

Meanwhile Norah had spent a miserable day. Mrs. Barson said nothing further about Arthur, but maintained an ominous silence, keeping Norah close at work, and only speaking to give her such instructions as she needed.

As the afternoon drew in, however, she began to harass her with questions, till the poor girl was at her wit's end how to answer truthfully without getting Arthur into fresh trouble. Her own conscience was not quite clear with respect to the threepence; for though sisterly love had prompted her, the idea that she was encouraging him in disobedience made her very uneasy.

'Perhaps, if I had not given him that, he would have stayed at home,' said she over and over again to herself. 'He could not have gone without money, and my foolishness put temptation in his way. Of course he could not resist; I might have foreseen that, and I am to blame for all the misery he will have to suffer. I am sure there would have been no harm in his going, if only father had not forbidden him. Harry Prestwick would not have asked him to do anything wrong, and father would not have thought of objecting if Aunt Barson had not made him. She always is so hard on poor Arthur.'

Norah started to feel her aunt's eyes glaring on her through her spectacles.

'That young scamp must have been hungry

enough all day long!' exclaimed Mrs. Barson at last; 'and serve him right, too! Had he any money?'

'He gave his last penny to a beggar woman at the door,' answered Norah, evading the question.

'A very stupid, ill-judged thing to do! pauperising the poor and bringing no end of tramps round the house. Some fat, lazy hussy, I warrant.'

'She looked very miserable, aunt, and she seemed very tired. I think she must have been a gipsy.'

'Arthur ought to know better than to have anything to say to such a good-for-nothing vagabond. Why do you think she was a gipsy?'

'She wanted to tell our fortunes,' answered Norah, with a trembling fear of what would follow.

'Oh! so you were there too. Did you give her any money?'

'No, aunt.'

'How was that, since you considered her so worthy of charity?'

Mrs. Barson was evidently bent on mischief. Norah began to shiver in her shoes.

'I had none for her,' answered she.

'I thought your father gave you and Arthur sixpence each on New Year's Day. What had you done with yours?'

'I had promised it to Mrs. Wright to help make up her rent. The poor old soul was afraid the landlord would put the brokers in,' said Norah, hoping her aunt would be satisfied.

But Mrs. Barson was not to be put off.

'Oh! so you gave it to Mrs. Wright,' pursued she.

Norah said nothing.

'Did you give her the sixpence?'

'She would not take it all,' answered Norah reluctantly.

'Why not?'

'Because Mrs. Morley up at the farm had paid her for some needlework, and she could manage without.'

'How much did you give her?'

'Threepence.'

'What have you done with the rest?'

Poor Norah was quite at bay.

'I gave it to Arthur,' said she in a scarcely audible voice.

'This morning?'

'Yes, aunt.'

'Oh! very well, miss; since you know how to help your brother so cleverly in his wickedness, perhaps you would like to feel the effects of it. Your father shall hear of this; he shall know that he has not even a daughter in whom he can trust. Do not think I shall spare you. If Providence had made you a boy, you would have been every whit as bad as Arthur, perhaps worse, for of all the deceitful young minxes I have ever come across, you are the slyest.'

Great tears were falling on Norah's work.

'I did not mean to do any harm, aunt,' said she; 'I thought Arthur would be so hungry; and it was not as if he was going with bad rude boys. Harry Prestwick was at the head of them, you know.'

'Indeed, miss! I wonder how long it has been the fashion for young people to set up their

opinions in opposition to those of their elders. Perhaps you would like to argue the matter with your father.'

This threat put the climax to Norah's distress, and she fairly broke down just as a loud knock announced her father's return to tea.

CHAPTER XIV.

WATCHING.

BEFORE Mrs. Barson could add another word, Norah had sprung from her chair and taken refuge in her own room at the top of the house. Her eyes were red with crying, and even had she been quite certain that Mrs. Barson would say nothing about Arthur till after tea, she was too miserable to be able to eat. Her father had often spoken sharply when goaded to it by Mrs. Barson, but he had never been really very angry with her yet. Even in her mother's lifetime he had always been stern; she knew he was passionate, and the recollection of his frequent severity to Arthur made her tremble, not so much for herself as for her brother. If there was one offence that he was certain to punish more rigorously than any other, it was disobedience. It would be vain for Arthur to plead that he had not heard what his father said; the very fact of his having quitted the room before Mr. Soane had finished speaking was sufficient proof that he intended to defy his father's authority.

Fortunately for Norah, Mr. Soane was not alone; and Mrs. Barson was forced to postpone her dreaded disclosure. Norah's absence from the tea-table provoked no comment, her aunt being of

opinion that if young people did not trouble themselves to be in at meals, they deserved to go without.

The voices from downstairs sounded merry when the door stood open for Martha to clear away ; and Norah listened from the attic landing, hoping that after all the storm might blow over. She was beginning to wonder when Arthur would come ; perhaps, if he were only home soon, his conduct might be overlooked, in consequence of the visitor's arrival. It was getting late, the sun had set before she ran upstairs, and now the sky was glittering with stars. She went into her room and leant out of the high dormer-window to listen for Arthur's step, but the wind was so biting she drew her head in shivering, and returned to the landing.

'Most people have their troubles and crosses to bear,' said she to herself. 'This, to be sure, is partly of my own making. I suppose sorrow and suffering are almost always the result of sin ; and yet, too, how many you see who are afflicted. Why is that ? Why does not God let all the trouble and sickness fall upon the wicked ? Is it to make the good better ? I remember poor old Mrs Wright said to me the last time I saw her, "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." What a comfort it must be to her to feel that ! Her poverty and rheumatism would be so much harder to bear, if she did not believe that God had sent them in love. I wish Aunt Barson would let us love her a little, but she is so cross and unkind. Of course I ought not to have given Arthur the money, when papa had said he was not to go ; still, I did it unthinkingly. I did not mean to do wrong.'

Norah paused suddenly in this train of thought. 'Ah!' exclaimed she half aloud; 'that is what most people would say, "I forgot"—"I did not mean to do wrong." Then, has the unhappiness I have felt to-day been really a message from God, to lead me back into the path of right? It must have been. He is so good—so wise—He would not send us suffering and sorrow if they did not draw us nearer to Him.'

But a sound had caught her ear; surely that was the gate that had just swung to. She held her breath to listen. Yes, some one was coming up the path; it was Arthur, she felt sure; and without waiting a moment she flew down to the door and opened it before he had time to knock.

His face was bruised and bleeding, his eyes swollen.

Norah could scarcely repress a cry of alarm.

'Where is father?' whispered he.

'In there with a gentleman,' said she, pointing to the dining-room.

'Who is he?'

'I do not know. What is the matter, Artie? Are you much hurt? Come into the kitchen.'

Arthur needed no second invitation, and creeping along the hall they hurried down to the kind-hearted Martha.

'Good heart alive, Master Arthur!' exclaimed Martha, jumping up from her comfortable seat by the fire, and dropping the cap she was trimming in her alarm. 'What have you been and done? That's all along of those horrid skates. Give a boy a pair of legs, and he's bound to slide without hurting himself nor any one else; but stick him on

those tittery-tottery things! Oh, my! Did you go through?’

‘No,’ said Arthur, who would have laughed outright if he had not been restrained by the fear of his father’s anger. ‘I’ve thrashed a boy who deserved it if ever a fellow did. I don’t know whether he or I got the worst of it. He should have had more if they hadn’t stopped us.’

‘Oh, Arthur!’ exclaimed Norah.

‘What! you don’t mean to say you’ve been fighting?’ cried Martha. ‘Come now, I like pluck. What did you pitch into him for? or did he pitch into you?’

‘He hit me first, but it was only because he got the start of me.’

‘What will father say?’ cried Norah.

‘What did he say when he heard I was gone?’

‘I don’t know. Aunt was very cross, and I haven’t seen father yet.’

‘She always is,’ returned Arthur; ‘of course she will do her best to lash father up. Who is with them?’

‘Mr. Prestwick,’ answered Martha; ‘he has been here ever so long.’

‘How lucky!’ cried Arthur. ‘Here, Martha, give me some water to wash my face and make myself a little presentable—look sharp! I shall just go in and let them have the whole affair straight out. I guess Aunt Barson’s tongue won’t be so glib while Mr. Prestwick is there, and his own son can bear out the truth of what I say.’

In a few minutes, having bathed the stains from his face and brushed the muddy snow-marks off his clothes, Arthur made his appearance in the dining-

room with an air of determination—not altogether free from misgivings—but which betrayed plainly that he was convinced it was now or never.

Mr. Soane, who was explaining something to Mr. Prestwick, scarcely saw him; Mrs. Barson eyed him in amazement.

‘I wonder you are not ashamed,’ began she; but Arthur’s impetuosity carried the day.

‘Father,’ cried he, ‘I’ve been thrashing the meanest rascal that ever drew breath; and I’m sure you’ll say he deserved it richly.’

Mr. Prestwick turned towards him, Mr. Soane frowned ominously, not best pleased at the interruption.

‘You look as if he had given you a Roland for your Oliver,’ said Mr. Prestwick. ‘What in the world have you been up to? I thought Harry told me you were off to the fens with him.’

‘So I was, sir, and a jolly day we had of it; but just as we were thinking of coming home, up rushed that conceited young bully, Frank Bruce.’

‘Frank Bruce! Of all the quiet, steady-going boys about; well, go on. This grows exciting, Mr. Soane; it brings back our own schooldays, eh?’

‘I am pained, sir, that my son should have been mixed up in such a disgraceful quarrel. I am exceedingly annoyed that he has not more sense than to present himself to you in such a plight. Go on, Arthur; finish your story, since Mr. Prestwick wishes to hear it.’

‘He sought the quarrel with me, father, not I with him. Two or three times during the day he had tried to insult me, and at last he pursued me and began abusing me for slandering his sister.’

'Indeed ! pray what about ?' inquired Mr. Prestwick.

'Why, sir, he declared that I had been spreading it all over the place that Miss Bruce had daubed Norah's picture, to prevent her winning the prize. I have never said such a thing ; I did not mention the matter to any one excepting your son ; and he will tell you that I did not accuse Miss Bruce. I only said Norah was positive she did not put those strokes in herself, and that I could not believe she did.'

'I can see very clearly how this scandal has arisen,' said Mr. Prestwick. 'In Miss Simpson's anxiety to get at the root of the matter, she has been obliged to trust to many, and we all know how unreliable young ladies' confidences are. I must say I respect your manly defence of your own honour, Arthur, and the brotherly spirit both of you have displayed ; but I think we must bind you and Frank over to keep the peace till wiser heads than yours have unravelled the mystery. What do you say, Mr. Soane ?'

'I am quite of your opinion, sir ; Arthur must learn that people should not settle their disputes by mauling one another black and blue.'

'Arthur's disobedience has been the cause of the whole disgraceful affair,' observed Mrs. Barson severely ; 'if he had——'

Mr. Soane interrupted her somewhat hastily.

'I had at first intended forbidding Arthur to make one of the hockey party,' said he ; 'but hearing that your son, Mr. Prestwick, was at the head of it, I felt sure there would be no cause for objection.'

Mr. Prestwick laughed.

'I am sorry he has not justified your good opinion, Mr. Soane.'

'That was a matter he could not possibly anticipate,' replied Mr. Soane blandly ; 'and now, with your permission, we will dismiss the young rascal. Ask Martha for some supper, Arthur, and then to bed with you.'

CHAPTER XV.

SERVED HIM RIGHT.

ARTHUR betook himself to the kitchen with a light heart. His own satisfaction at the chastisement he had bestowed on Frank Bruce, strengthened by Mr. Prestwick's half-commendation of his conduct, had swelled into a feeling of conscious heroism that tempered the soreness and stiffness of his bruises and elevated him considerably in his own estimation. Now he was all right with his father, he knew he had nothing further to fear from Mrs. Barson. He sprang down the stairs three or four at a time, almost upsetting Norah, who was part-way up, listening breathlessly.

'Hooray! hooray!' exclaimed he in prudently moderate tones. 'Long life and prosperity to old Prestwick! May his shadow never grow less! as the old Turk said.'

'I'd put the Mr. to his name, if I were you,' suggested Martha, coming forward with a hot iron in her hand, with which she had just been smoothing out some muslin aprons. 'Take care he doesn't hear; he'd think you mighty rude.'

'What did father say?' asked Norah.

'Say?—not much, that is, I forget. Oh no, though, I remember, he said I was to have some supper. What is there, Martha? Get me something

quick. Mauling a fellow gives one an appetite, I can tell you.'

'Bless the boy! what a nose you've got! I guess fighting would come nearer taking mine away. What will you have, Master Arthur, cold beef or giblet pie?'

'Giblet pie, Martha, by all means. It isn't often I get a chance of supper at all, let alone anything good, so I may as well make the best of it. I reckon Aunt Crosspatch wasn't best pleased I got off. You should have seen her glaring at me through her specs, her eyes looked for all the world like a tiger's. If Mr. Prestwick hadn't been here, there would have been a fine rumpus.'

'I'll wager there would,' said Martha, putting some milk on the fire to boil. 'Come now,' muttered she to herself, 'if there's one thing I like in a boy, it is pluck.'

By this time the cloth was spread, and Arthur sat down to the huge plateful of giblet pie Martha placed before him.

The good-tempered girl either regarded the species of horse popularly called nightmare as extinct, or fancied so bold a youth could mount it without danger, by the way she had taken to heart Arthur's hint that fighting was a powerful stimulus to appetite.

'This *is* good!' cried he, smacking his lips. 'I say, Norrie, don't you want some?'

Norah, who had not ventured downstairs since her father came home to tea, was, to tell the truth, decidedly hungry, though she had at first entirely forgotten the fact in her anxiety about Arthur.

The sight of his face had made her feel rather

bad, but it was growing late, nothing had passed her lips since dinner, and the tempting savour of the pie was beginning to have its effect.

Fear of Mrs. Barson's displeasure, however, held her back, and she was raising a feeble protest when Martha settled the matter for her.

'What an out-and-out stupid I was not to think of it!' said she. 'Draw your chair up near the fire. I'll cut you some in a minute; there's plenty of milk for you both.'

Luckily for Norah and Arthur, Mrs. Barson was too much engrossed with Mr. Prestwick to trouble herself about her scapegrace young nephew, who, having finished up with a nice piece of bread and butter pudding, edged his chair close to the fire, put his feet on the fender, and with his elbows resting on his knees, leaned forward, propped his chin meditatively on both hands and looked into the blazes.

The example was contagious; Norah brought her chair close to the fender, and prepared for a talk.

'Your face does look dreadful!' said she. 'I wonder what makes boys so fond of fighting.'

'Girls don't know what things boys have to put up with—horrid things—insults that no fellow of spirit could stand,' answered Arthur grandly.

'There's six of one and half a dozen of the other, take my word for it,' said Martha, setting her flat-iron heavily down on the stand. 'Only all the world would cry shame, if a woman took to fighting every girl who said ugly things of her.'

'What did you fight about, Arthur?' asked Norah; 'you haven't told me that yet.'

'About you,' answered he, still looking into the red-hot cinders.

'About me, Arthur! Why? I don't understand, cried she.

'About that picture of yours. No boy with any pluck in him would have put up tamely with such an insinuation. I should have been a mean-spirited, contemptible coward if I hadn't pitched into him.'

'Into whom, Arthur? Who was he, and what did he say?' cried Norah.

'Frank Bruce; and I'll give him some more if he should ever dare to try it on again. He won't do that, I reckon.'

'Frank Bruce!' repeated Norah in amazement. 'Oh, Arthur, Amy Bruce's brother!'

'Yes, Amy Bruce's brother, or any other girl's brother; why not?'

'But what did he say?'

'Why, that I had been spreading it about the place that Amy tampered with your drawing to prevent your getting the prize. I never said such a thing—I never thought such a thing; though this I do say, that somebody must have done it, for I am quite sure you didn't.'

Norah was looking terribly pained.

'Oh, Arthur!' she said, 'what a deal of trouble that unlucky prize has given, when I thought it would have made us all so happy.'

'Prizes generally do make a lot of spite, even when everything is clear and above board,' answered Arthur.

'I am almost sorry I tried for it,' said she sadly.

'Nonsense, Norrie, that's like a girl. Just because of a little unpleasantness, you mustn't think you

ought to go and poke yourself into a corner and stand out of everybody's way. The truth will come out sooner or later, and then——'

'Everybody will hate me worse than ever.'

'Hate *you*, Norrie? Who in the world could hate you?' asked Arthur, who thought there never was a girl like Norah.

'It's all on account of her cleverness,' declared Martha, putting her iron on the stove while she pulled out some lace frills. 'I shouldn't wonder a bit if don't turn out to be spite, just spite—nothing more nor less; like when Susan Howes took and smeared Annie Smith's new dress with tar just before the school treat, all because it was smarter than her own.'

'You wouldn't catch a boy playing a mean trick like that,' said Arthur. 'There was no use in that.'

'I don't see but what blacking a schoolfellow's eyes is every bit as bad, and every bit as useless, Master Arthur; only that's the way boys take it out of one another,' retorted the maid. 'You can't talk.'

'I tell you it served him right, Martha; you don't understand these things.'

'Maybe I don't, but it seems to me as if it all depends upon who does it,' said she, jeeringly.

'I am so sorry,' murmured Norah; 'I did hope that I should have made friends at last with all the girls; but there, do what I will, they seem determined to show me the cold shoulder. Oh, dear! how hard it is to do right!'

'You'll all be wrong to-morrow, if you don't go off to bed pretty smart,' said Martha, looking to-

wards the clock. 'Your aunt won't forget the time, if you do.'

Norah got up with a heavy sigh, and Arthur looked regretfully at the fire.

'You won't be fit to show your face for a week or more,' said Martha.

'Nor will he,' answered Arthur, as he went stiffly upstairs.

CHAPTER XVI.

BLACK-BALLED.

THE holidays were at an end, and the girls were back at school once more. The frost and snow had disappeared with the festive season, and the past month seemed like a dream. Excepting for the absence of Ellinor Prestwick, who had not yet returned from a long visit to an invalid aunt, and the addition of one or two new day-boarders, no change had taken place, the old girls were there, the old routine went on with the old unfailing regularity.

In one respect only was there a noticeable difference among the seniors. From the very first day of their reassembling there appeared to be a unanimous determination to send Amy Bruce to coventry. One and all avoided her. Did she attempt to join any little confidential *coterie*, her appearance was either the signal for a general dispersal, or the subject was carried on in mysterious undertones and hints, with a marked turning of the shoulders, as though to let her see she was not wanted. Of all the girls who previously had treated her with such affection, Norah—the despised Norah—was the only one who would associate with her.

Amy was at a loss to comprehend the reason for this sudden falling off. Even Tottie Middleton,

who hitherto had been her special friend, now seemed altered; she was not openly rude like the others, but instead of walking to school with her, as she had always done before, she invariably contrived to miss her, and was so stiff and constrained, so unlike her former self, that Amy scarcely knew her old friend. Lillie was the same loving impulsive little creature as ever, only she was one of the younger girls, and her patronage was a matter of no moment.

After a great deal of consideration Amy came to the conclusion that jealousy was the cause of the unamiable *clique* formed against her; and though deeply hurt that her schoolfellows' regard had been so easily alienated, she resolved lovingly to try to regain it by patience and forbearance.

'Tottie, dear,' said she one bright day in February, 'to-morrow is my birthday. You will come and spend the evening with me, will you not?'

'I don't know,' hesitated Tottie. 'I am afraid——'

'Oh, do, Tot! you must. You know you haven't missed once for three years.'

'Haven't I?' answered Tottie, turning away to hide the tears that started into her eyes; 'well, I'll—think about it.'

Every one agreed how much Tottie was changed since her illness; instead of the cheerful, merry girl of heretofore she was reserved, melancholy, almost morose at times. In spite of her half-promise to think of Amy's birthday, she neither sent her usual card of loving wishes, nor did she spend the auspicious evening at the Elms.

Amy was more grieved than mortified. Determined that nothing on her part should be left undone, she cut some good slices of the rich cake her mamma had made for the occasion, and wrapping them daintily in fancy note-paper, started for school next day, carrying a pretty little basket in addition to her usual pack of books.

It was a lovely morning, sunny and mild, and as soon as the ten minutes' break for luncheon sounded at eleven o'clock, the girls began banding together in exclusive twos and threes and starting off arm in arm for a quick turn round the lawn, leaving Amy to follow or stay as she pleased.

But Amy was not discouraged even by this marked slight. Hurrying after the ungracious troop, she joined them just as they emerged on the broad gravel walk in front of the house, and making her way towards Tottie, held up her basket with a smile.

'Stop a moment,' cried she; 'I have brought a piece of cake for each of you—my birthday cake; I thought it would be so nice to eat it in the garden.'

It was impossible for them to feign they had not seen her, and several of the nearest swung round on their heels and eyed her with supercilious indifference. Upon this the rest followed suit, and stood looking quizzically from one to another, waiting to see the upshot.

'Really I do not feel to care much for cake this morning,' observed Miss Forbes to Tottie, without vouchsafing a word to Amy; 'do you?'

Led on by her companion, longing all the while

to make a half-compromise with Amy by accepting the cake, but not daring to incur the ridicule of the others, Tottie made no answer.

'Thank you,' said Miss Forbes with frigid politeness, 'I, that is, we, do not wish for any to-day.' Then taking Tottie by the hand, she led her away, and they went off, twining their arms round each other's waists, and not seeking to conceal their laughter directly their backs were turned.

A similar repulse awaited Amy from one and all.

With praiseworthy courage she endeavoured to hand the little packets round, but heads and necks seemed to have stiffened more painfully erect than ever, and a cold 'No, thank you' met her as the rest followed Tottie and Miss Forbes down the garden walk. This was too much for poor Amy. Bursting into tears, she was retreating to the schoolroom, when as she turned into the hall she felt a gentle arm steal round her, and Lillie said, 'Did you bring a piece for me, Amy?'

That night, after Lillie had been asleep some hours, she was awakened by the sound of footsteps in her sister's room. At first she lay still, thinking that perhaps she had not been in bed so long as she fancied, and that it was Tottie undressing; but finding the walking up and down continued at intervals she grew alarmed, and slipping on her dressing-gown, went to see what was the matter.

When she opened the door, Tottie, only half-undressed, with her hair hanging dishevelled over her shoulders, was sitting on the bed, resting her forehead on the foot-rail.



'What do you want?' asked she, raising her head.

Lillie was startled at her wild, haggard face.

'Why are you not in bed, Tottie? Are you ill?'

'No; I can't sleep.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, I don't know. Go to bed; you can't do me any good.'

'Let me come and talk to you for a little while; perhaps that will make you sleepy.'

'I'm not sleepy, and I don't want to sleep, answered Tottie petulantly. 'There, go back into bed; you will take cold wandering about like this.'

'So will you, Tot, without anything round your shoulders and arms; the wind is very sharp now, although it was so warm in the sun to-day;' and Lillie pulled the window-blind aside to look at the sky. 'See, the stars are quite bright.'

'Don't do that, don't, don't!' cried Tottie. 'Put the blind down.'

Lillie did so, then coming to the bed, stood looking at her as she sat.

'What made you so unkind to Amy to-day?' asked Lillie at last.

'If you have come on purpose to tease me, you had better go,' was the sullen answer.

'You know I don't want to tease you, dear; only poor Amy was dreadfully grieved. All the other girls put together wouldn't have grieved her half so much; but you and she always used to be such great friends.'

'I can't help that. Go to bed. It's quite bad enough to bear, without your reproaches.'

'Why must you bear it, Tottie?'

'Why? Because when you've got into a bog you must sink down—down—down. It's too late now. Go away and leave me to myself.'

'What is the matter with you, Tottie? There has been a great change in you for a long while; you are not my own gentle, happy sister now.'

'Happy!' repeated Tottie mockingly. 'Is there any happiness for the wicked?'

'If they repent, dear, God is very merciful. Pray to Him to help you.'

'Do the wicked pray?' asked Tottie in the same tone.

'Oh, Tottie, dear,' cried Lillie, throwing her arms around her; 'if you have done anything wrong, ask God to pardon you. "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Tell me what it is that troubles you.'

Tottie shook her head sadly.

'It is too late, Lillie; it is too late now. I suppose I shall get used to it by degrees, and then it won't be so hard to bear. But it is so bad to have it on me day after day, to feel when the sun is shining that the light is too bright; oh, Lil, you can't think how awful it is to know that I can't escape from it, that I must keep the thought of it with me for ever!'

'Poor Tottie! poor darling sister! The Bible doesn't say so. "If we confess our sins——"'

'If we confess,' interrupted Tottie vehemently; 'confess—*that* is just what I can't do. If I confess at all, I must confess to the whole world. I can't do *that*. Lillie, you don't know what you are

talking about. No, no, I must bear it—I must. As long as I live that horrible burden will be on me. I wish I could only go away from them all.'

In vain did Lillie reason, entreating Tottie to confide the trouble to her, trying to persuade her to seek pardon and peace where alone it may be found. Tottie listened, wept, but maintained an obstinate silence.

'Was Amy so very much hurt?' asked she at length.

'Yes, dear, very much.'

'Tell her—no—don't tell her anything at all. I am going to bed now.'

With these words the miserable girl sprang into bed as she was, and pulling the clothes tightly round her, buried her face in the pillow.

CHAPTER XVII.

'JOY COMETH IN THE MORNING.'

LILLIE stood watching her sister for some time, scarcely venturing to move, lest she should disturb Tottie; but she was so still, her breathing was so regular, that the affectionate girl felt convinced she was really asleep at last.

Noiselessly kneeling down by the bedside, she began to pour out her soul in supplication for her unhappy sister. She was very far from imagining the extent of Tottie's guilt; and fancying that the cause of her distress was the unkindness into which she had been led through jealousy of Amy Bruce, she prayed that God would soften her heart and give her grace to repent. So earnest was she that the fear and difficulty of approaching the 'great white throne' vanished; she did not feel as if God were in heaven and she on earth—He seemed very near to her—and her petitions flowed freely, no longer in inarticulate whispers, but aloud, as a child speaks to her father.

Comforted, and full of faith that her prayers would be answered, she rose after awhile. Tottie had not stirred, and creeping quietly from the room, she went back to bed.

Scarcely had the door closed when the wretched Tottie raised herself and looked round.

The candle was still burning low down in the

socket, for Lillie had forgotten to extinguish it, and the wick made strange shadows as it sputtered now and again in the draught from the window. Sitting up, Tottie drew a heavy, bitter sigh.

'God hears the *righteous* when they cry to Him,' murmured she; 'but how can I pray? Oh! if I could only free myself from this guilt, this horrible burden that presses on me! How can I pray? How can I mock God by asking for His help when I cannot, dare not face the shame that lies before me? How can I own to *that*? How can I endure the disgrace? Miss Simpson would know it—all the girls would know it. How they would despise me! No, I could never bear *that*.'

She sat wringing her hands, and looking into the dim circle of light thrown on the ceiling by the candle-wick.

'What a fearful thing sin is!' thought she; 'what misery it brings! What a coward it has made of me! Amy is bearing the disgrace that ought to fall on me; I know she is bearing it, and yet I am too mean, too dishonourable to come forward and say I did it. I can stand by and let the girls treat her as they did yesterday; I can let them believe her guilty of that wicked, abominable deception; I can even join them in slighting her—poor, good, tender-hearted Amy! who has never done an ill-natured action in her life.'

The remorse she felt for the suffering her sin had entailed on the innocent Amy seemed harder to bear even than the knowledge of her own mis-doing.

'Oh, Amy, dear Amy,' groaned she, 'if I had only thought of all my wickedness would cost you!

but there is no help now, nothing remains but for me to try and forget it.'

Then as she sat there Lillie's sweet, childish voice sounded once more in her ears.

'God will hear her,' cried she, with a ray of hope. 'She prayed that He would give me strength to do the right. But she did not know what she was asking. Will God ever give me courage to confess? No, no, that would be too hard; but perhaps He will give me strength to bear the sorrow.'

This thought calmed her for awhile, but failed utterly to give her the comfort she sought.

'God is holy and just,' cried she; 'He will never make sin easy or pleasant for me. If He helps me, it will be to put the sin away, not to deaden my conscience to it. Has He heard Lillie's prayer? Is *this* His answer?—to make me *long* to come to Him? Oh! if I only could, if I only dared! "Whosoever cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out,"' murmured she.

'Is God, then, more ready to receive me than I am to go to Him? Why am I so afraid of what people will say?—more afraid of *that* than of God's anger? He knows all my thoughts—not one of them is hidden from His all-searching eye; He saw me when——' Tottie shuddered.

"I will arise and go unto my Father," cried she, getting out of bed; and throwing herself on her knees upon the self-same spot where Lillie had knelt to pray for her, she clasped her hands in an agony of contrite entreaty.

The winter twilight was glimmering greyly when she arose hurriedly, and, going into her sister's room, bent over the sleeping girl.

A tear that fell on Lillie's cheek half roused her and she unclosed her eyes.

'I did it, Lillie,' whispered Tottie.

'Is it you, dear? Is anything the matter?' cried Lillie, waking in an instant and throwing her arms around Tottie.

'I have come to tell you, Lillie, I did it.'

'Did what, darling?'

'Spoilt Norah's painting so that she should not have the prize,' sobbed Tottie, hiding her face on Lillie's shoulder. 'You thought I was asleep, but I heard every word you said, and after struggling for a long while—a very long while—with my obstinate pride, God put it into my heart to pray for strength to confess all my wickedness.'

'Oh, Tottie, darling, I am so sorry, so grieved,' said Lillie, pressing the weeping girl tenderly in her arms.

'Not for me, Lillie ; do not be sorry for me. It has made me feel very humble, very much ashamed, but God has drawn me nearer to Himself this night than I have ever been before. He has shown me my sin and my need of a Saviour, and, Lillie, darling, I know that He has heard my prayer. It will be hard for me to tell father and mother, for they will be so grieved, but it is a part of my punishment, and I must bear it. It will be hard to rob Amy of the prize she thought she had won, but God will give me strength ; and Amy is too good to begrudge Norah what is hers by right.'

That morning, as soon as the girls were all assembled, Tottie rose, and in a broken voice humbly begged Miss Simpson to hear what she had to say. She had started some time earlier than

usual, to avoid the other girls, and the sorrowful expression on her face had attracted the attention of all as they entered the room.

Amy Bruce, who was too painfully conscious of the contemptuous glances that followed her as she walked to her desk even to raise her eyes, looked up for the first time when Tottie spoke.

'I have a very painful confession to make,' began Tottie tremulously. 'I spoilt Norah Soane's picture to prevent her gaining the prize. I did it while Amy was finishing hers. Amy had nothing whatever to do with it. I alone am to blame. I am very sorry for all the suffering I have caused her, and my wicked action will be a source of bitter regret to me as long as I live. I am ready to submit to any punishment you think best, even should that necessitate my leaving the school.'

The last words were scarcely audible, and Tottie, white as marble, remained standing, with her eyes fixed on the ground, waiting to hear her sentence.

Miss Simpson had been so completely taken by surprise and so pained, that it was some time before she could command herself sufficiently to speak.

'I am deeply grieved, Miss Middleton,' said she at length, 'more grieved than I can well express, by the terrible disclosure you have just made. Had the knowledge come to me from any one else but yourself, only one course would have been open to me—to expel you from the school. As, however, some motive has prompted you—sorrow for your sin, I sincerely trust—to take the matter into your own hands, I shall leave it in the first place to Norah Soane and Amy Bruce, who have been the

chief sufferers by your misconduct, and then to the rest of the seniors to decide your fate.'

The girls looked from one to another, and once more Miss Simpson's voice broke the silence.

'Miss Bruce, since by Miss Middleton's confession you will lose the prize, I call on you first. Is it your wish that she should go or stay?'

Amy's face flushed crimson as she felt all eyes riveted on her.

'If she stays, shall I regain my friend?' faltered she, looking across at Tottie.

This was too much for the repentant girl, and her tears welled fast.

'Let her stay!' pleaded Amy in tearful accents.

My picture was not worth the prize; I always felt that.'

'Let her stay!' echoed Norah, as Miss Simpson signed to her to speak; 'and, if Amy is willing, let us spare Tottie the pain of further explanations by leaving Amy in possession of the prize. Tottie has suffered enough already.'

But to this Tottie refused to agree, and, supported by the new Christian strength that had come to her in her penitence, bore her punishment bravely. With a heart purified from all the petty malice and uncharitableness that had disfigured it before, she soon won the affection and esteem of all who knew her, who sought her now, not for the evanescent devotion of a school attachment, but for the solid worth of a friendship cemented by the holiest of all ties—Christian love.

THE END.